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PLAYS

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

# PLAYS:

The Circle, The Letter, The Constant Wife

BY

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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# THE CIRCLE

## PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Clive Champion-Cheney

Arnold Champion-Cheney, M.P.

Lord Porteous

Edward Luton

Lady Catherine Champion-Cheney

Elizabeth

Mrs. Shenstone.

*The action takes place at Aston-Adey, Arnold Champion-Cheney's house in Dorset.*

# THE FIRST ACT

# THE CIRCLE

## THE FIRST ACT

*The Scene is a stately drawing-room at Aston-Adey, with fine pictures on the walls and Georgian furniture. Aston-Adey has been described, with many illustrations, in* Country Life. *It is not a house, but a place. Its owner takes a great pride in it, and there is nothing in the room which is not of the period. Through the French windows at the back can be seen the beautiful gardens which are one of the features.*

*It is a fine summer morning.*

ARNOLD *comes in. He is a man of about thirty-five, tall and good-looking, fair, with a clean-cut, sensitive face. He has a look that is intellectual, but somewhat bloodless. He is very well dressed.*

ARNOLD. [*Calling.*] Elizabeth! [*He goes to the window and calls again.*] Elizabeth! [*He rings the bell. While he is waiting he gives a look round the room. He slightly alters the position of one of the chairs. He takes an ornament from the chimney-piece and blows the dust from it.*]

[*A* FOOTMAN *comes in.*

Oh, George! see if you can find Mrs. Cheney, and ask her if she'd be good enough to come here.

FOOTMAN. Very good, sir.

[*The* FOOTMAN *turns to go.*

ARNOLD. Who is supposed to look after this room?

FOOTMAN. I don't know, sir.

ARNOLD. I wish when they dust they'd take care to replace the things exactly as they were before.

FOOTMAN. Yes, sir.

ARNOLD. [*Dismissing him.*] All right.

[*The* FOOTMAN *goes out. He goes again to the window and calls.*

ARNOLD. Elizabeth! [*He sees* MRS. SHENSTONE.] Oh, Anna, do you know where Elizabeth is?

[MRS. SHENSTONE *comes in from the garden. She is a woman of forty, pleasant and of elegant appearance.*

ANNA. Isn't she playing tennis?

ARNOLD. No, I've been down to the tennis court. Something very tiresome has happened.

ANNA. Oh?

ARNOLD. I wonder where the deuce she is.

ANNA. When do you expect Lord Porteous and Lady Kitty?

ARNOLD. They're motoring down in time for luncheon.

ANNA. Are you sure you want me to be here? It's not too late yet, you know. I can have my things packed and catch a train for somewhere or other.

ARNOLD. No, of course we want you. It'll make it so much easier if there are people here. It was exceedingly kind of you to come.

ANNA. Oh, nonsense!

ARNOLD. And I think it was a good thing to have Teddie Luton down.

ANNA. He is so breezy, isn't he?

ARNOLD. Yes, that's his great asset. I don't know that he's very intelligent, but, you know, there are occasions when you want a bull in a china shop. I sent one of the servants to find Elizabeth.

ANNA. I daresay she's putting on her shoes. She and Teddie were going to have a single.

ARNOLD. It can't take all this time to change one's shoes.

ANNA. [*With a smile.*] One can't change one's shoes without powdering one's nose, you know.

[ELIZABETH *comes in. She is a very pretty creature in the early twenties. She wears a light summer frock.*

ARNOLD. My dear, I've been hunting for you everywhere. What *have* you been doing?

ELIZABETH. Nothing! I've been standing on my head.

ARNOLD. My father's here.

ELIZABETH. [*Startled.*] Where?

ARNOLD. At the cottage. He arrived last night.

ELIZABETH. Damn!

ARNOLD. [*Good-humouredly.*] I wish you wouldn't say that, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. If you're not going to say "Damn" when a thing's damnable, when are you going to say "Damn"?

ARNOLD. I should have thought you could say, "Oh, bother!" or something like that.

ELIZABETH. But that wouldn't express my sentiments. Besides, at that speech day when you were giving away the prizes you said there were no synonyms in the English language.

ANNA. [*Smiling.*] Oh, Elizabeth! it's very unfair to expect a politician to live in private up to the statements he makes in public.

ARNOLD. I'm always willing to stand by anything I've said. There *are* no synonyms in the English language.

ELIZABETH. In that case I shall be regretfully forced to continue to say "Damn" whenever I feel like it.

[EDWARD LUTON *shows himself at the window. He is an attractive youth in flannels.*

TEDDIE. I say, what about this tennis?

ELIZABETH. Come in. We're having a scene.

TEDDIE. [*Entering.*] How splendid! What about?

ELIZABETH. The English language.

TEDDIE. Don't tell me you've been splitting your infinitives.

ARNOLD. [*With the shadow of a frown.*] I wish you'd be serious, Elizabeth. The situation is none too pleasant.

ANNA. I think Teddie and I had better make ourselves scarce.

ELIZABETH. Nonsense! You're both in it. If there's going to be any unpleasantness we want your moral support. That's why we asked you to come.

TEDDIE. And I thought I'd been asked for my blue eyes.

ELIZABETH. Vain beast! And they happen to be brown.

TEDDIE. Is anything up?

ELIZABETH. Arnold's father arrived last night.

TEDDIE. Did he, by Jove! I thought he was in Paris.

ARNOLD. So did we all. He told me he'd be there for the next month.

ANNA. Have you seen him?

ARNOLD. No! he rang me up. It's a mercy he had a telephone put in the cottage. It would have been a pretty kettle of fish if he'd just walked in.

ELIZABETH. Did you tell him Lady Catherine was coming?

ARNOLD. Of course not. I was flabbergasted to know he was here. And then I thought we'd better talk it over first.

ELIZABETH. Is he coming along here?

ARNOLD. Yes. He suggested it, and I couldn't think of any excuse to prevent him.

TEDDIE. Couldn't you put the other people off?

ARNOLD. They're coming by car. They may be here any minute. It's too late to do that.

ELIZABETH. Besides, it would be beastly.

ARNOLD. I knew it was silly to have them here. Elizabeth insisted.

ELIZABETH. After all, she *is* your mother, Arnold.

ARNOLD. That meant precious little to her when she —went away. You can't imagine it means very much to me now.

ELIZABETH. It's thirty years ago. It seems so absurd to bear malice after all that time.

ARNOLD. I don't bear malice, but the fact remains that she did me the most irreparable harm. I can find no excuse for her.

ELIZABETH. Have you ever tried to?

ARNOLD. My dear Elizabeth, it's no good going over all that again. The facts are lamentably simple. She had a husband who adored her, a wonderful position, all the money she could want, and a child of five. And she ran away with a married man.

ELIZABETH. Lady Porteous is not a very attractive woman, Arnold. [*To* ANNA.] Do you know her?

ANNA. [*Smiling.*] "Forbidding" is the word, I think.

ARNOLD. If you're going to make little jokes about it, I have nothing more to say.

ANNA. I'm sorry, Arnold.

ELIZABETH. Perhaps your mother couldn't help herself—if she was in love?

ARNOLD. And had no sense of honour, duty, or decency? Oh, yes, under those circumstances you can explain a great deal.

ELIZABETH. That's not a very pretty way to speak of your mother.

ARNOLD. I can't look on her as my mother.

ELIZABETH. What you can't get over is that she didn't think of you. Some of us are more mother and some of us more woman. It gives me a little thrill when I think that she loved that man so much. She sacrificed her name, her position, and her child to him.

ARNOLD. You really can't expect the said child to have any great affection for the mother who treated him like that.

ELIZABETH. No, I don't think I do. But I think it's a pity after all these years that you shouldn't be friends.

ARNOLD. I wonder if you realise what it was to grow up under the shadow of that horrible scandal. Everywhere, at school, and at Oxford, and afterwards in Lon-

don, I was always the son of Lady Kitty Cheney. Oh, it was cruel, cruel!

ELIZABETH. Yes, I know, Arnold. It was beastly for you.

ARNOLD. It would have been bad enough if it had been an ordinary case, but the position of the people made it ten times worse. My father was in the House then, and Porteous—he hadn't succeeded to the title—was in the House too; he was Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and he was very much in the public eye.

ANNA. My father always used to say he was the ablest man in the party. Every one was expecting him to be Prime Minister.

ARNOLD. You can imagine what a boon it was to the British public. They hadn't had such a treat for a generation. The most popular song of the day was about my mother. Did you ever hear it? "Naughty Lady Kitty. Thought it such a pity . . ."

ELIZABETH. [*Interrupting.*] Oh, Arnold, don't!

ARNOLD. And then they never let people forget them. If they'd lived quietly in Florence and not made a fuss the scandal would have died down. But those constant actions between Lord and Lady Porteous kept on reminding everyone.

TEDDIE. What were they having actions about?

ARNOLD. Of course my father divorced his wife, but Lady Porteous refused to divorce Porteous. He tried to force her by refusing to support her and turning her out of her house, and heaven knows what. They were constantly wrangling in the law courts.

ANNA. I think it was monstrous of Lady Porteous.

ARNOLD. She knew he wanted to marry my mother, and she hated my mother. You can't blame her.

ANNA. It must have been very difficult for them.

ARNOLD. That's why they've lived in Florence. Porteous has money. They found people there who were willing to accept the situation.

ELIZABETH. This is the first time they've ever come to England.

ARNOLD. My father will have to be told, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. Yes.

ANNA. [*To* ELIZABETH.] Has he ever spoken to you about Lady Kitty?

ELIZABETH. Never.

ARNOLD. I don't think her name has passed his lips since she ran away from this house thirty years ago.

TEDDIE. Oh, they lived here?

ARNOLD. Naturally. There was a house-party, and one evening neither Porteous nor my mother came down to dinner. The rest of them waited. They couldn't make it out. My father sent up to my mother's room, and a note was found on the pin-cushion.

ELIZABETH. [*With a faint smile.*] That's what they did in the Dark Ages.

ARNOLD. I think he took a dislike to this house from that horrible night. He never lived here again, and when I married he handed the place over to me. He just has a cottage now on the estate that he comes to when he feels inclined.

ELIZABETH. It's been very nice for us.

ARNOLD. I owe everything to my father. I don't think he'll ever forgive me for asking these people to come here.

ELIZABETH. I'm going to take all the blame on myself, Arnold.

ARNOLD. [*Irritably.*] The situation was embarrassing enough anyhow. I don't know how I ought to treat them.

ELIZABETH. Don't you think that'll settle itself when you see them?

ARNOLD. After all, they're my guests. I shall try and behave like a gentleman.

ELIZABETH. I wouldn't. We haven't got central heating.

ARNOLD. [*Taking no notice.*] Will she expect me to kiss her?

ELIZABETH. [*With a smile.*] Surely.

ARNOLD. It always makes me uncomfortable when people are effusive.

ANNA. But I can't understand why you never saw her before.

ARNOLD. I believe she tried to see me when I was little, but my father thought it better she shouldn't.

ANNA. Yes, but when you were grown up?

ARNOLD. She was always in Italy. I never went to Italy.

ELIZABETH. It seems to me so pathetic that if you saw one another in the street you wouldn't recognise each other.

ARNOLD. Is it my fault?

ELIZABETH. You've promised to be very gentle with her and very kind.

ARNOLD. The mistake was asking Porteous to come too. It looks as though we condoned the whole thing. And how am I to treat him? Am I to shake him by the hand and slap him on the back? He absolutely ruined my father's life.

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] How much would you give for a nice motor accident that prevented them from coming?

ARNOLD. I let you persuade me against my better judgment, and I've regretted it ever since.

ELIZABETH. [*Good-humouredly.*] I think it's very lucky that Anna and Teddie are here. I don't foresee a very successful party.

ARNOLD. I'm going to do my best. I gave you my promise and I shall keep it. But I can't answer for my father.

ANNA. Here is your father.

[MR. CHAMPION-CHENEY *shows himself at one of the French windows.*

C.-C. May I come in through the window, or shall I have myself announced by a supercilious flunkey?

ELIZABETH. Come in. We've been expecting you.

C.-C. Impatiently, I hope, my dear child.

[MR. CHAMPION-CHENEY *is a tall man in the early sixties, spare, with a fine head of gray hair and an intelligent, somewhat ascetic face. He is very carefully dressed. He is a man who makes the most of himself. He bears his years jauntily. He kisses* ELIZABETH *and then holds out his hand to* ARNOLD.

ELIZABETH. We thought you'd be in Paris for another month.

C.-C. How are you, Arnold? I always reserve to myself the privilege of changing my mind. It's the only one elderly gentlemen share with pretty women.

ELIZABETH. You know Anna.

C.-C. [*Shaking hands with her.*] Of course I do. How very nice to see you here! Are you staying long?

ANNA. As long as I'm welcome.

ELIZABETH. And this is Mr. Luton.

C.-C. How do you do? Do you play bridge?

LUTON. I do.

C.-C. Capital. Do you declare without top honours?

LUTON. Never.

C.-C. Of such is the kingdom of heaven. I see that you are a good young man.

LUTON. But, like the good in general, I am poor.

C.-C. Never mind; if your principles are right, you can play ten shillings a hundred without danger. I never play less, and I never play more.

ARNOLD. And you—are you going to stay long, father?

C.-C. To luncheon, if you'll have me.

[ARNOLD *gives* ELIZABETH *a harassed look.*

ELIZABETH. That'll be jolly.

ARNOLD. I didn't mean that. Of course you're going to stay for luncheon. I meant, how long are you going to stay down here?

C.-C. A week.

[*There is a moment's pause. Everyone but* CHAMPION-CHENEY *is slightly embarrassed.*

TEDDIE. I think we'd better chuck our tennis.

ELIZABETH. Yes. I want my father-in-law to tell me what they're wearing in Paris this week.

TEDDIE. I'll go and put the rackets away.

[TEDDIE *goes out.*

ARNOLD. It's nearly one o'clock, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I didn't know it was so late.

ANNA. [*To* ARNOLD.] I wonder if I can persuade you to take a turn in the garden before luncheon.

ARNOLD. [*Jumping at the idea.*] I'd love it.

[ANNA *goes out of the window, and as he follows her he stops irresolutely.*

I want you to look at this chair I've just got. I think it's rather good.

C.-C. Charming.

ARNOLD. About 1750, I should say. Good design, isn't it? It hasn't been restored or anything.

C.-C. Very pretty.

ARNOLD. I think it was a good buy, don't you?

C.-C. Oh, my dear boy! you know I'm entirely ignorant about these things.

ARNOLD. It's exactly my period . . . I shall see you at luncheon, then.

[*He follows* ANNA *through the window.*

C.-C. Who is that young man?

ELIZABETH. Mr. Luton. He's only just been demobilised. He's the manager of a rubber estate in the F.M.S.

C.-C. And what are the F.M.S. when they're at home?

ELIZABETH. The Federated Malay States. He joined up at the beginning of the war. He's just going back there.

C.-C. And why have we been left alone in this very marked manner?

ELIZABETH. Have we? I didn't notice it.

C.-C. I suppose it's difficult for the young to realise that one may be old without being a fool.

ELIZABETH. I never thought you that. Everyone knows you're very intelligent.

C.-C. They certainly ought to by now. I've told them often enough. Are you a little nervous?

ELIZABETH. Let me feel my pulse. [*She puts her finger on her wrist.*] It's perfectly regular.

C.-C. When I suggested staying to luncheon Arnold looked exactly like a dose of castor oil.

ELIZABETH. I wish you'd sit down.

C.-C. Will it make it easier for you? [*He takes a chair.*] You have evidently something very disagreeable to say to me.

ELIZABETH. You won't be cross with me?

C.-C. How old are you?

ELIZABETH. Twenty-five.

C.-C. I'm never cross with a woman under thirty.

ELIZABETH. Oh, then I've got ten years.

C.-C. Mathematics?

ELIZABETH. No. Paint.

C.-C. Well?

ELIZABETH. [*Reflectively.*] I think it would be easier if I sat on your knees.

C.-C. That is a pleasing taste of yours, but you must take care not to put on weight.

[*She sits down on his knees.*

ELIZABETH. Am I boney?

C.-C. On the contrary. . . . I'm listening.

ELIZABETH. Lady Catherine's coming here.

C.-C. Who's Lady Catherine?

ELIZABETH. Your—Arnold's mother.

C.-C. Is she?

[*He withdraws himself a little and* ELIZABETH *gets up.*

ELIZABETH. You mustn't blame Arnold. It's my fault.

I insisted. He was against it. I nagged him till he gave way. And then I wrote and asked her to come.

C.-C. I didn't know you knew her.

ELIZABETH. I don't. But I heard she was in London. She's staying at Claridge's. It seemed so heartless not to take the smallest notice of her.

C.-C. When is she coming?

ELIZABETH. We're expecting her in time for luncheon.

C.-C. As soon as that? I understand the embarrassment.

ELIZABETH. You see, we never expected you to be here. You said you'd be in Paris for another month.

C.-C. My dear child, this is your house. There's no reason why you shouldn't ask whom you please to stay with you.

ELIZABETH. After all, whatever her faults, she's Arnold's mother. It seemed so unnatural that they should never see one another. My heart ached for that poor lonely woman.

C.-C. I never heard that she was lonely, and she certainly isn't poor.

ELIZABETH. And there's something else. I couldn't ask her by herself. It would have been so—so insulting. I asked Lord Porteous, too.

C.-C. I see.

ELIZABETH. I daresay you'd rather not meet them.

C.-C. I daresay they'd rather not meet me. I shall get a capital luncheon at the cottage. I've noticed you always get the best food if you come in unexpectedly and have the same as they're having in the servants' hall.

ELIZABETH. No one's ever talked to me about Lady Kitty. It's always been a subject that everyone has avoided. I've never even seen a photograph of her.

C.-C. The house was full of them when she left. I think I told the butler to throw them in the dust-bin. She was very much photographed.

ELIZABETH. Won't you tell me what she was like?

C.-C. She was very like you, Elizabeth, only she had dark hair instead of red.

ELIZABETH. Poor dear! it must be quite white now.

C.-C. I daresay. She was a pretty little thing.

ELIZABETH. But she was one of the great beauties of her day. They say she was lovely.

C.-C. She had the most adorable little nose, like yours. . . .

ELIZABETH. D'you like my nose?

C.-C. And she was very dainty, with a beautiful little figure; very light on her feet. She was like a *marquise* in an old French comedy. Yes, she was lovely.

ELIZABETH. And I'm sure she's lovely still.

C.-C. She's no chicken, you know.

ELIZABETH. You can't expect me to look at it as you and Arnold do. When you've loved as she's loved you may grow old, but you grow old beautifully.

C.-C. You're very romantic.

ELIZABETH. If everyone hadn't made such a mystery of it I daresay I shouldn't feel as I do. I know she did a great wrong to you and a great wrong to Arnold. I'm willing to acknowledge that.

C.-C. I'm sure it's very kind of you.

ELIZABETH. But she loved and she dared. Romance is such an illusive thing. You read of it in books, but it's seldom you see it face to face. I can't help it if it thrills me.

C.-C. I am painfully aware that the husband in these cases is not a romantic object.

ELIZABETH. She had the world at her feet. You were rich. She was a figure in society. And she gave up everything for love.

C.-C. [*Dryly.*] I'm beginning to suspect it wasn't only for her sake and for Arnold's that you asked her to come here.

ELIZABETH. I seem to know her already. I think her face is a little sad, for a love like that doesn't leave you

gay, it leaves you grave, but I think her pale face is unlined. It's like a child's.

C.-C. My dear, how you let your imagination run away with you!

ELIZABETH. I imagine her slight and frail.

C.-C. Frail, certainly.

ELIZABETH. With beautiful thin hands and white hair. I've pictured her so often in that Renaissance Palace that they live in, with old Masters on the walls and lovely carved things all round, sitting in a black silk dress with old lace round her neck and old-fashioned diamonds. You see, I never knew my mother; she died when I was a baby. You can't confide in aunts with huge families of their own. I want Arnold's mother to be a mother to me. I've got so much to say to her.

C.-C. Are you happy with Arnold?

ELIZABETH. Why shouldn't I be?

C.-C. Why haven't you got any babies?

ELIZABETH. Give us a little time. We've only been married three years.

C.-C. I wonder what Hughie is like now!

ELIZABETH. Lord Porteous?

C.-C. He wore his clothes better than any man in London. You know he'd have been Prime Minister if he'd remained in politics.

ELIZABETH. What was he like then?

C.-C. He was a nice-looking fellow. Fine horseman. I suppose there was something very fascinating about him. Yellow hair and blue eyes, you know. He had a very good figure. I liked him. I was his parliamentary secretary. He was Arnold's godfather.

ELIZABETH. I know.

C.-C. I wonder if he ever regrets!

ELIZABETH. I wouldn't.

C.-C. Well, I must be strolling back to my cottage.

ELIZABETH. You're not angry with me?

C.-C. Not a bit.

[*She puts up her face for him to kiss. He kisses her on both cheeks and then goes out. In a moment* TEDDIE *is seen at the window.*

TEDDIE. I saw the old blighter go.

ELIZABETH. Come in.

TEDDIE. Everything all right?

ELIZABETH. Oh, quite, as far as he's concerned. He's going to keep out of the way.

TEDDIE. Was it beastly?

ELIZABETH. No, he made it very easy for me. He's a nice old thing.

TEDDIE. You were rather scared.

ELIZABETH. A little. I am still. I don't know why.

TEDDIE. I guessed you were. I thought I'd come and give you a little moral support. It's ripping here, isn't it?

ELIZABETH. It is rather nice.

TEDDIE. It'll be jolly to think of it when I'm back in the F.M.S.

ELIZABETH. Aren't you homesick sometimes?

TEDDIE. Oh, everyone is now and then, you know.

ELIZABETH. You could have got a job in England if you'd wanted to, couldn't you?

TEDDIE. Oh, but I love it out there. England's ripping to come back to, but I couldn't live here now. It's like a woman you're desperately in love with as long as you don't see her, but when you're with her she maddens you so that you can't bear her.

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] What's wrong with England?

TEDDIE. I don't think anything's wrong with England. I expect something's wrong with me. I've been away too long. England seems to me full of people doing things they don't want to because other people expect it of them.

ELIZABETH. Isn't that what you call a high degree of civilisation?

TEDDIE. People seem to me so insincere. When you go to parties in London they're all babbling about art, and you feel that in their hearts they don't care twopence

about it. They read the books that everybody is talking about because they don't want to be out of it. In the F.M.S. we don't get very many books, and we read those we have over and over again. They mean so much to us. I don't think the people over there are half so clever as the people at home, but one gets to know them better. You see, there are so few of us that we have to make the best of one another.

ELIZABETH. I imagine that frills are not much worn in the F.M.S. It must be a comfort.

TEDDIE. It's not much good being pretentious where everyone knows exactly who you are and what your income is.

ELIZABETH. I don't think you want too much sincerity in society. It would be like an iron girder in a house of cards.

TEDDIE. And then, you know, the place is ripping. You get used to a blue sky and you miss it in England.

ELIZABETH. What do you do with yourself all the time?

TEDDIE. Oh, one works like blazes. You have to be a pretty hefty fellow to be a planter. And then there's ripping bathing. You know, it's lovely, with palm trees all along the beach. And there's shooting. And now and then we have a little dance to a gramophone.

ELIZABETH. [*Pretending to tease him.*] I think you've got a young woman out there, Teddie.

TEDDIE. [*Vehemently.*] Oh, no!

[*She is a little taken aback by the earnestness of his disclaimer. There is a moment's silence, then she recovers herself.*

ELIZABETH. But you'll have to marry and settle down one of these days, you know.

TEDDIE. I want to, but it's not a thing you can do lightly.

ELIZABETH. I don't know why there more than elsewhere.

TEDDIE. In England if people don't get on they go their own ways and jog along after a fashion. In a place like that you're thrown a great deal on your own resources.

ELIZABETH. Of course.

TEDDIE. Lots of girls come out because they think they're going to have a good time. But if they're empty-headed, then they're just faced with their own emptiness and they're done. If their husbands can afford it they go home and settle down as grass-widows.

ELIZABETH. I've met them. They seem to find it a very pleasant occupation.

TEDDIE. It's rotten for their husbands, though.

ELIZABETH. And if the husbands can't afford it?

TEDDIE. Oh, then they tipple.

ELIZABETH. It's not a very alluring prospect.

TEDDIE. But if the woman's the right sort she wouldn't exchange it for any life in the world. When all's said and done it's we who've made the Empire.

ELIZABETH. What sort is the right sort?

TEDDIE. A woman of courage and endurance and sincerity. Of course, it's hopeless unless she's in love with her husband.

[*He is looking at her earnestly and she, raising her eyes, gives him a long look. There is silence between them.*

TEDDIE. My house stands on the side of a hill, and the cocoanut trees wind down to the shore. Azaleas grow in my garden, and camellias, and all sorts of ripping flowers. And in front of me is the winding coast line, and then the blue sea.

[*A pause.*

Do you know that I'm awfully in love with you?

ELIZABETH. [*Gravely.*] I wasn't quite sure. I wondered.

TEDDIE. And you?

[*She nods slowly.*

I've never kissed you.

ELIZABETH. I don't want you to.

[*They look at one another steadily. They are both grave.* ARNOLD *comes in hurriedly.*

ARNOLD. They're coming, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. [*As though returning from a distant world.*] Who?

ARNOLD. [*Impatiently.*] My dear! My mother, of course. The car is just coming up the drive.

TEDDIE. Would you like me to clear out?

ARNOLD. No, no! For goodness' sake stay.

ELIZABETH. We'd better go and meet them, Arnold.

ARNOLD. No, no; I think they'd much better be shown in. I feel simply sick with nervousness.

[ANNA *comes in from the garden.*

ANNA. Your guests have arrived.

ELIZABETH. Yes, I know.

ARNOLD. I've given orders that luncheon should be served at once.

ELIZABETH. Why? It's not half-past one already, is it?

ARNOLD. I thought it would help. When you don't know exactly what to say you can always eat.

[*The* BUTLER *comes in and announces.*

BUTLER. Lady Catherine Champion-Cheney! Lord Porteous!

[LADY KITTY *comes in followed by* PORTEOUS, *and the* BUTLER *goes out.* LADY KITTY *is a gay little lady, with dyed red hair and painted cheeks. She is somewhat outrageously dressed. She never forgets that she has been a pretty woman and she still behaves as if she were twenty-five.* LORD PORTEOUS *is a very bald, elderly gentleman in loose, rather eccentric clothes. He is snappy and gruff. This is not at all the couple that Elizabeth expected, and for a moment she stares at them with round, startled eyes.* LADY KITTY *goes up to her with outstretched hands.*

LADY KITTY. Elizabeth! Elizabeth! [*She kisses her*

*effusively.*] What an adorable creature! [*Turning to* PORTEOUS.] Hughie, isn't she adorable?

PORTEOUS. [*With a grunt.*] Ugh!

[ELIZABETH, *smiling now, turns to him and gives him her hand.*

ELIZABETH. How d'you do?

PORTEOUS. Damnable road you've got down here. How d'you do, my dear? Why d'you have such damnable roads in England?

[LADY KITTY'S *eyes fall on* TEDDIE *and she goes up to him with her arms thrown back, prepared to throw them round him.*

LADY KITTY. My boy, my boy! I should have known you anywhere!

ELIZABETH. [*Hastily.*] That's Arnold.

LADY KITTY. [*Without a moment's hesitation.*] The image of his father! I should have known him anywhere! [*She throws her arms round his neck.*] My boy, my boy!

PORTEOUS. [*With a grunt.*] Ugh!

LADY KITTY. Tell me, would you have known me again? Have I changed?

ARNOLD. I was only five, you know, when—when you . . .

LADY KITTY. [*Emotionally.*] I remember as if it was yesterday. I went up into your room. [*With a sudden change of manner.*] By the way, I always thought that nurse drank. Did you ever find out if she really did?

PORTEOUS. How the devil can you expect him to know that, Kitty?

LADY KITTY. You've never had a child, Hughie; how can you tell what they know and what they don't?

ELIZABETH. [*Coming to the rescue.*] This is Arnold, Lord Porteous.

PORTEOUS. [*Shaking hands with him.*] How d'you do? I knew your father.

ARNOLD. Yes.

PORTEOUS. Alive still?

ARNOLD. Yes.

PORTEOUS. He must be getting on. Is he well?

ARNOLD. Very.

PORTEOUS. Ugh! Takes care of himself, I suppose. I'm not at all well. This damned climate doesn't agree with me.

ELIZABETH. [*To* LADY KITTY.] This is Mrs. Shenstone. And this is Mr. Luton. I hope you don't mind a very small party.

LADY KITTY. [*Shaking hands with* ANNA *and* TEDDIE.] Oh, no, I shall enjoy it. I used to give enormous parties here. Political, you know. How nice you've made this room!

ELIZABETH. Oh, that's Arnold.

ARNOLD. [*Nervously.*] D'you like this chair? I've just bought it. It's exactly my period.

PORTEOUS. [*Bluntly.*] It's a fake.

ARNOLD. [*Indignantly.*] I don't think it is for a minute.

PORTEOUS. The legs are not right.

ARNOLD. I don't know how you can say that. If there is anything right about it, it's the legs.

LADY KITTY. I'm sure they're right.

PORTEOUS. You know nothing whatever about it, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. That's what you think. *I* think it's a beautiful chair. Hepplewhite?

ARNOLD. No, Sheraton.

LADY KITTY. Oh, I know. "The School for Scandal."

PORTEOUS. Sheraton, my dear. Sheraton.

LADY KITTY. Yes, that's what I say. I acted the screen scene at some amateur theatricals in Florence, and Ermeto Novelli, the great Italian tragedian, told me he'd never seen a Lady Teazle like me.

PORTEOUS. Ugh!

LADY KITTY. [*To* ELIZABETH.] Do you act?

ELIZABETH. Oh, I couldn't. I should be too nervous.

LADY KITTY. I'm never nervous. I'm a born actress.

Of course, if I had my time over again I'd go on the stage. You know, it's extraordinary how they keep young. Actresses, I mean. I think it's because they're always playing different parts. Hughie, do you think Arnold takes after me or after his father? Of course I think he's the very image of me. Arnold, I think I ought to tell you that I was received into the Catholic Church last winter. I'd been thinking about it for years, and last time we were at Monte Carlo I met such a nice monsignore. I told him what my difficulties were and he was too wonderful. I knew Hughie wouldn't approve, so I kept it a secret. [*To* ELIZABETH.] Are you interested in religion? I think it's too wonderful. We must have a long talk about it one of these days. [*Pointing to her frock.*] Callot?

ELIZABETH. No, Worth.

LADY KITTY. I knew it was either Worth or Callot. Of course, it's line that's the important thing. I go to Worth myself, and I always say to him, "Line, my dear Worth, line." What *is* the matter, Hughie?

PORTEOUS. These new teeth of mine are so damned uncomfortable.

LADY KITTY. Men are extraordinary. They can't stand the smallest discomfort. Why, a woman's life is uncomfortable from the moment she gets up in the morning till the moment she goes to bed at night. And d'you think it's comfortable to sleep with a mask on your face?

PORTEOUS. They don't seem to hold up properly.

LADY KITTY. Well, that's not the fault of your teeth. That's the fault of your gums.

PORTEOUS. Damned rotten dentist. That's what's the matter.

LADY KITTY. I thought he was a very nice dentist. He told me *my* teeth would last till I was fifty. He has a Chinese room. It's so interesting; while he scrapes your teeth he tells you all about the dear Empress Dowager. Are you interested in China? I think it's too wonderful.

You know they've cut off their pigtails. I think it's such a pity. They were so picturesque.

[*The* BUTLER *comes in.*

BUTLER. Luncheon is served, sir.

ELIZABETH. Would you like to see your rooms?

PORTEOUS. We can see our rooms after luncheon.

LADY KITTY. I must powder my nose, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Powder it down here.

LADY KITTY. I never saw anyone so inconsiderate.

PORTEOUS. You'll keep us all waiting half an hour. I know you.

LADY KITTY. [*Fumbling in her bag.*] Oh, well, peace at any price, as Lord Beaconsfield said.

PORTEOUS. He said a lot of damned silly things, KITTY, but he never said that.

[LADY KITTY'S *face changes. Perplexity is followed by dismay, and dismay by consternation.*

LADY KITTY. Oh!

ELIZABETH. What is the matter?

LADY KITTY. [*With anguish.*] My lip-stick!

ELIZABETH. Can't you find it?

LADY KITTY. I had it in the car. Hughie, you remember that I had it in the car.

PORTEOUS. I don't remember anything about it.

LADY KITTY. Don't be so stupid, Hughie. Why, when we came through the gates I said: "My home, my home!" and I took it out and put some on my lips.

ELIZABETH. Perhaps you dropped it in the car.

LADY KITTY. For heaven's sake send some one to look for it.

ARNOLD. I'll ring.

LADY KITTY. I'm absolutely lost without my lip-stick. Lend me yours, darling, will you?

ELIZABETH. I'm awfully sorry. I'm afraid I haven't got one.

LADY KITTY. Do you mean to say you don't use a lip-stick?

ELIZABETH. Never.

PORTEOUS. Look at her lips. What the devil d'you think she wants muck like that for?

LADY KITTY. Oh, my dear, what a mistake you make! You *must* use a lip-stick. It's so good for the lips. Men like it, you know. I couldn't *live* without a lip-stick.

[CHAMPION-CHENEY *appears at the window holding in his upstretched hand a little gold case.*

C.-C. [*As he comes in.*] Has anyone here lost a diminutive utensil containing, unless I am mistaken, a favourite preparation for the toilet?

[ARNOLD *and* ELIZABETH *are thunderstruck at his appearance and even* TEDDIE *and* ANNA *are taken aback. But* LADY KITTY *is overjoyed.*

LADY KITTY. My lip-stick!

C.-C. I found it in the drive and I ventured to bring it in.

LADY KITTY. It's Saint Antony. I said a little prayer to him when I was hunting in my bag.

PORTEOUS. Saint Antony be blowed! It's Clive, by God!

LADY KITTY. [*Startled, her attention suddenly turning from the lip-stick.*] Clive!

C.-C. You didn't recognise me. It's many years since we met.

LADY KITTY. My poor Clive, your hair has gone quite white!

C.-C. [*Holding out his hand.*] I hope you had a pleasant journey down from London.

LADY KITTY. [*Offering him her cheek.*] You may kiss me, Clive.

C.-C. [*Kissing her.*] You don't mind, Hughie?

PORTEOUS. [*With a grunt.*] Ugh!

C.-C. [*Going up to him cordially.*] And how are you, my dear Hughie?

PORTEOUS. Damned rheumatic if you want to know. Filthy climate you have in this country.

C.-C. Aren't you going to shake hands with me, Hughie?

PORTEOUS. I have no objection to shaking hands with you.

C.-C. You've aged, my poor Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Some one was asking me how old you were the other day.

C.-C. Were they surprised when you told them?

PORTEOUS. Surprised! They wondered you weren't dead.

[*The* BUTLER *comes in.*

BUTLER. Did you ring, sir?

ARNOLD. No. Oh, yes, I did. It doesn't matter now.

C.-C. [*As the* BUTLER *is going.*] One moment. My dear Elizabeth, I've come to throw myself on your mercy. My servants are busy with their own affairs. There's not a thing for me to eat in my cottage.

ELIZABETH. Oh, but we shall be delighted if you'll lunch with us.

C.-C. It either means that or my immediate death from starvation. You don't mind, Arnold?

ARNOLD. My dear father!

ELIZABETH. [*To the* BUTLER.] Mr. Cheney will lunch here.

BUTLER. Very good, ma'am.

C.-C. [*To* LADY KITTY.] And what do you think of Arnold?

LADY KITTY. I adore him.

C.-C. He's grown, hasn't he? But then you'd expect him to do that in thirty years.

ARNOLD. For God's sake let's go in to lunch, Elizabeth!

END OF THE FIRST ACT

# THE SECOND ACT

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## THE SECOND ACT

*The Scene is the same as in the preceding Act.*
*It is afternoon. When the curtain rises* PORTEOUS *and* LADY KITTY, ANNA *and* TEDDIE *are playing bridge.* ELIZABETH *and* CHAMPION-CHENEY *are watching.* PORTEOUS *and* LADY KITTY *are partners.*

C.-C. When will Arnold be back, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH. Soon, I think.

C.-C. Is he addressing a meeting?

ELIZABETH. No, it's only a conference with his agent and one or two constituents.

PORTEOUS. [*Irritably.*] How anyone can be expected to play bridge when people are shouting at the top of their voices all round them, I for one cannot understand.

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] I'm so sorry.

ANNA. I can see your hand, Lord Porteous.

PORTEOUS. It may help you.

LADY KITTY. I've told you over and over again to hold your cards up. It ruins one's game when one can't help seeing one's opponent's hand.

PORTEOUS. One isn't obliged to look.

LADY KITTY. What was Arnold's majority at the last election?

ELIZABETH. Seven hundred and something.

C.-C. He'll have to fight for it if he wants to keep his seat next time.

PORTEOUS. Are we playing bridge, or talking politics?

LADY KITTY. I never find that conversation interferes with my game.

PORTEOUS. You certainly play no worse when you talk than when you hold your tongue.

LADY KITTY. I think that's a very offensive thing to say, Hughie. Just because I don't play the same game as you do you think I can't play.

PORTEOUS. I'm glad you acknowledge it's not the same game as I play. But why in God's name do you call it bridge?

C.-C. I agree with Kitty. I hate people who play bridge as though they were at a funeral and knew their feet were getting wet.

PORTEOUS. Of course you take Kitty's part.

LADY KITTY. That's the least he can do.

C.-C. I have a naturally cheerful disposition.

PORTEOUS. You've never had anything to sour it.

LADY KITTY. I don't know what you mean by that, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. [*Trying to contain himself.*] Must you trump my ace?

LADY KITTY. [*Innocently.*] Oh, was that your ace, darling?

PORTEOUS. [*Furiously.*] Yes, it was my ace.

LADY KITTY. Oh, well, it was the only trump I had. I shouldn't have made it anyway.

PORTEOUS. You needn't have told them that. Now she knows exactly what I've got.

LADY KITTY. She knew before.

PORTEOUS. How could she know?

LADY KITTY. She said she'd seen your hand.

ANNA. Oh, I didn't. I said I could see it.

LADY KITTY. Well, I naturally supposed that if she could see it she did.

PORTEOUS. Really, Kitty, you have the most extraordinary ideas.

C.-C. Not at all. If anyone is such a fool as to show me his hand, of course I look at it.

PORTEOUS. [*Fuming.*] If you study the etiquette of bridge, you'll discover that onlokers are expected not to interfere with the game.

C.-C. My dear Hughie, this is a matter of ethics, not of bridge.

ANNA. Anyhow, I get the game. And rubber.

TEDDIE. I claim a revoke.

PORTEOUS. Who revoked?

TEDDIE. You did.

PORTEOUS. Nonsense. I've never revoked in my life.

TEDDIE. I'll show you. [*He turns over the tricks to show the faces of the cards.*] You threw away a club on the third heart trick and you had another heart.

PORTEOUS. I never had more than two hearts.

TEDDIE. Oh, yes, you had. Look here. That's the card you played on the last trick but one.

LADY KITTY. [*Delighted to catch him out.*] There's no doubt about it, Hughie. You revoked.

PORTEOUS. I tell you I did not revoke. I never revoke.

C.-C. You did, Hughie. I wondered what on earth you were doing.

PORTEOUS. I don't know how anyone can be expected not to revoke when there's this confounded chatter going on all the time.

TEDDIE. Well, that's another hundred to us.

PORTEOUS. [*To* CHAMPION-CHENEY.] I wish you wouldn't breathe down my neck. I never can play bridge when there's somebody breathing down my neck.

[*The party have risen from the bridge-table, and they scatter about the room.*

ANNA. Well, I'm going to take a book and lie down in the hammock till it's time to dress.

TEDDIE. [*Who has been adding up.*] I'll put it down in the book, shall I?

PORTEOUS. [*Who has not moved, setting out the cards for a patience.*] Yes, yes, put it down. I never revoke.

[ANNA *goes out.*

LADY KITTY. Would you like to come for a little stroll, Hughie?

PORTEOUS. What for?

LADY KITTY. Exercise.

PORTEOUS. I hate exercise.

C.-C. [*Looking at the patience.*] The seven goes on the eight.

[PORTEOUS *takes no notice.*

LADY KITTY. The seven goes on the eight, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. I don't choose to put the seven on the eight.

C.-C. That knave goes on the queen.

PORTEOUS. I'm not blind, thank you.

LADY KITTY. The three goes on the four.

C.-C. All these go over.

PORTEOUS. [*Furiously.*] Am I playing this patience, or are you playing it?

LADY KITTY. But you're missing everything.

PORTEOUS. That's my business.

C.-C. It's no good losing your temper over it, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Go away, both of you. You irritate me.

LADY KITTY. We were only trying to help you, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. I don't want to be helped. I want to do it by myself.

LADY KITTY. I think your manners are perfectly deplorable, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. It's simply maddening when you're playing patience and people won't leave you alone.

C.-C. We won't say another word.

PORTEOUS. That three goes. I believe it's coming out. If I'd been such a fool as to put that seven up I shouldn't have been able to bring these down.

[*He puts down several cards while they watch him silently.*

LADY KITTY and C.-C. [*Together.*] The four goes on the five.

PORTEOUS. [*Throwing down the cards violently.*] Damn you! why don't you leave me alone? It's intolerable.

C.-C. It was coming out, my dear fellow.

PORTEOUS. I know it was coming out. Confound you!

LADY KITTY. How petty you are, Hughie!

PORTEOUS. Petty, be damned! I've told you over and

over again that I will not be interfered with when I'm playing patience.

LADY KITTY. Don't talk to me like that, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. I shall talk to you as I please.

LADY KITTY. [*Beginning to cry.*] Oh, you brute! You brute! [*She flings out of the room.*]

PORTEOUS. Oh, damn! now she's going to cry.

[*He shambles out into the garden.* CHAMPION-CHENEY, ELIZABETH *and* TEDDIE *are left alone. There is a moment's pause.* CHAMPION-CHENEY *looks from* TEDDIE *to* ELIZABETH, *with an ironical smile.*

C.-C. Upon my soul, they might be married. They frip so much.

ELIZABETH. [*Frigidly.*] It's been nice of you to come here so often since they arrived. It's helped to make things easy.

C.-C. Irony? It's a rhetorical form not much favoured in this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

ELIZABETH. What exactly are you getting at?

C.-C. How slangy the young women of the present day are! I suppose the fact that Arnold is a purist leads you to the contrary extravagance.

ELIZABETH. Anyhow you know what I mean.

C.-C. [*With a smile.*] I have a dim, groping suspicion.

ELIZABETH. You promised to keep away. Why did you come back the moment they arrived?

C.-C. Curiosity, my dear child. A surely pardonable curiosity.

ELIZABETH. And since then you've been here all the time. You don't generally favour us with so much of your company when you're down at your cottage.

C.-C. I've been excessively amused.

ELIZABETH. It has struck me that whenever they started fripping you took a malicious pleasure in goading them on.

C.-C. I don't think there's much love lost between them now, do you?

[TEDDIE *is making as though to leave the room.*

ELIZABETH. Don't go, Teddie.

C.-C. No, please don't. I'm only staying a minute. We were talking about Lady Kitty just before she arrived. [*To* ELIZABETH.] Do you remember? The pale, frail lady in black satin and old lace.

ELIZABETH. [*With a chuckle.*] You are a devil, you know.

C.-C. Ah, well, he's always had the reputation of being a humorist and a gentleman.

ELIZABETH. Did *you* expect her to be like that, poor dear?

C.-C. My dear child, I hadn't the vaguest idea. You were asking me the other day what she was like when she ran away. I didn't tell you half. She was so gay and so natural. Who would have thought that animation would turn into such frivolity, and that charming impulsiveness lead to such a ridiculous affectation?

ELIZABETH. It rather sets my nerves on edge to hear the way you talk of her.

C.-C. It's the truth that sets your nerves on edge, not I.

ELIZABETH. You loved her once. Have you no feeling for her at all?

C.-C. None. Why should I?

ELIZABETH. She's the mother of your son.

C.-C. My dear child, you have a charming nature, as simple, frank, and artless as hers was. Don't let pure humbug obscure your common sense.

ELIZABETH. We have no right to judge. She's only been here two days. We know nothing about her.

C.-C. My dear, her soul is as thickly rouged as her face. She hasn't an emotion that's sincere. She's tinsel You think I'm a cruel, cynical old man. Why, when I think of what she was, if I didn't laugh at what she has become I should cry.

ELIZABETH. How do you know she wouldn't be just

the same now if she'd remained your wife? Do you think your influence would have had such a salutary effect on her?

C.-C. [*Good-humouredly.*] I like you when you're bitter and rather insolent.

ELIZABETH. D'you like me enough to answer my question?

C.-C. She was only twenty-seven when she went away. She might have become anything. She might have become the woman you expected her to be. There are very few of us who are strong enough to make circumstances serve us. We are the creatures of our environment. She's a silly, worthless woman because she's led a silly, worthless life.

ELIZABETH. [*Disturbed.*] You're horrible to-day.

C.-C. I don't say it's I who could have prevented her from becoming this ridiculous caricature of a pretty woman grown old. But life could. Here she would have had the friends fit to her station, and a decent activity, and worthy interests. Ask her what her life has been all these years among divorced women and kept women and the men who consort with them. There is no more lamentable pursuit than a life of pleasure.

ELIZABETH. At all events she loved and she loved greatly. I have only pity and affection for her.

C.-C. And if she loved what d'you think she felt when she saw that she had ruined Hughie? Look at him. He was tight last night after dinner and tight the night before.

ELIZABETH. I know.

C.-C. And she took it as a matter of course. How long do you suppose he's been getting tight every night? Do you think he was like that thirty years ago? Can you imagine that that was a brilliant young man, whom everyone expected to be Prime Minister? Look at him now. A grumpy sodden old fellow with false teeth.

ELIZABETH. You have false teeth, too.

C.-C. Yes, but damn it all, they fit. She's ruined him and she knows she's ruined him.

ELIZABETH. [*Looking at him suspiciously.*] Why are you saying all this to me?

C.-C. Am I hurting your feelings?

ELIZABETH. I think I've had enough for the present.

C.-C. I'll go and have a look at the gold-fish. I want to see Arnold when he comes in. [*Politely.*] I'm afraid we've been boring Mr. Luton.

TEDDIE. Not at all.

C.-C. When are you going back to the F.M.S.?

TEDDIE. In about a month.

C.-C. I see.

[*He goes out.*

ELIZABETH. I wonder what he has at the back of his head.

TEDDIE. D'you think he was talking at you?

ELIZABETH. He's as clever as a bagful of monkeys.

[*There is a moment's pause.* TEDDIE *hesitates a little and when he speaks it is in a different tone. He is grave and somewhat nervous.*

TEDDIE. It seems very difficult to get a few minutes alone with you. I wonder if you've been making it difficult?

ELIZABETH. I wanted to think.

TEDDIE. I've made up my mind to go away to-morrow.

ELIZABETH. Why?

TEDDIE. I want you altogether or not at all.

ELIZABETH. You're so arbitrary.

TEDDIE. You said you—you said you cared for me.

ELIZABETH. I do.

TEDDIE. Do you mind if we talk it over now?

ELIZABETH. No.

TEDDIE. [*Frowning.*] It makes me feel rather shy and awkward. I've repeated to myself over and over again exactly what I want to say to you, and now all I'd prepared seems rather footling.

ELIZABETH. I'm so afraid I'm going to cry.

TEDDIE. I feel it's all so tremendously serious and I think we ought to keep emotion out of it. You're rather emotional, aren't you?

ELIZABETH. [*Half smiling and half in tears.*] So are you for the matter of that.

TEDDIE. That's why I wanted to have everything I meant to say to you cut and dried. I think it would be awfully unfair if I made love to you and all that sort of thing, and you were carried away. I wrote it all down and thought I'd send it you as a letter.

ELIZABETH. Why didn't you?

TEDDIE. I got the wind up. A letter seems so—so cold. You see, I love you so awfully.

ELIZABETH. For goodness' sake don't say that.

TEDDIE. You mustn't cry. Please don't, or I shall go all to pieces.

ELIZABETH. [*Trying to smile.*] I'm sorry. It doesn't mean anything really. It's only tears running out of my eyes.

TEDDIE. Our only chance is to be awfully matter-of-fact.

[*He stops for a moment. He finds it quite difficult to control himself. He clears his throat. He frowns with annoyance at himself.*

ELIZABETH. What's the matter?

TEDDIE. I've got a sort of lump in my throat. It is idiotic. I think I'll have a cigarette.

[*She watches him in silence while he lights a cigarette.* You see, I've never been in love with anyone before, not really. It's knocked me endways. I don't know how I can live without you now. . . . Does that old fool know I'm in love with you?

ELIZABETH. I think so.

TEDDIE. When he was talking about Lady Kitty smashing up Lord Porteous' career I thought there was something at the back of it.

ELIZABETH. I think he was trying to persuade me not to smash up yours.

TEDDIE. I'm sure that's very considerate of him, but I don't happen to have one to smash. I wish I had. It's the only time in my life I've wished I were a hell of a swell so that I could chuck it all and show you how much more you are to me than anything else in the world.

ELIZABETH. [*Affectionately.*] You're a dear old thing, Teddie.

TEDDIE. You know, I don't really know how to make love, but if I did I couldn't do it now because I just want to be absolutely practical.

ELIZABETH. [*Chaffing him.*] I'm glad you don't know how to make love. It would be almost more than I could bear.

TEDDIE. You see, I'm not at all romantic and that sort of thing. I'm just a common or garden business man. All this is so dreadfully serious and I think we ought to be sensible.

ELIZABETH. [*With a break in her voice.*] You owl!

TEDDIE. No, Elizabeth, don't say things like that to me. I want you to consider all the *pros* and *cons*, and my heart's thumping against my chest, and you know I love you, I love you, I love you.

ELIZABETH. [*In a sigh of passion.*] Oh, my precious!

TEDDIE. [*Impatiently, but with himself, rather than with* ELIZABETH.] Don't be idiotic, Elizabeth. I'm not going to tell you that I can't live without you and a lot of muck like that. You know that you mean everything in the world to me. [*Almost giving it up as a bad job.* Oh, my God!

ELIZABETH. [*Her voice faltering.*] D'you think there's anything you can say to me that I don't know already?

TEDDIE. [*Desperately.*] But I haven't said a single thing I wanted to. I'm a business man and I want to put it all in a business way, if you understand what I mean.

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] I don't believe you're a very good business man.

TEDDIE. [*Sharply.*] You don't know what you're talking about. I'm a first-rate business man, but somehow this is different. [*Hopelessly.*] I don't know why it won't go right.

ELIZABETH. What are we going to do about it?

TEDDIE. You see, it's not just because you're awfully pretty that I love you. I'd love you just as much if you were old and ugly. It's you I love, not what you look like. And it's not only love; love be blowed! It's that I *like* you so tremendously. I think you're such a ripping good sort. I just want to be with you. I feel so jolly and happy just to think you're there. I'm so awfully *fond* of you.

ELIZABETH. [*Laughing through her tears.*] I don't know if this is your idea of introducing a business proposition.

TEDDIE. Damn you, you won't let me.

ELIZABETH. You said "Damn you."

TEDDIE. I meant it.

ELIZABETH. Your voice sounded as if you meant it, you perfect duck!

TEDDIE. Really, Elizabeth, you're intolerable.

ELIZABETH. I'm doing nothing.

TEDDIE. Yes, you are, you're putting me off my blow. What I want to say is perfectly simple. I'm a very ordinary business man.

ELIZABETH. You've said that before.

TEDDIE. [*Angrily.*] Shut up. I haven't got a bob besides what I earn. I've got no position. I'm nothing. You're rich and you're a big pot and you've got everything that anyone can want. It's awful cheek my saying anything to you at all. But after all there's only one thing that really matters in the world, and that's love. I love you. Chuck all this, Elizabeth, and come to me.

ELIZABETH. Are you cross with me?

TEDDIE. Furious.

ELIZABETH. Darling!

TEDDIE. If you don't want me tell me so at once and let me get out quickly.

ELIZABETH. Teddie, nothing in the world matters anything to me but you. I'll go wherever you take me. I love you.

TEDDIE. [*All to pieces.*] Oh, my God!

ELIZABETH. Does it mean as much to you as that? Oh, Teddie!

TEDDIE. [*Trying to control himself.*] Don't be a fool, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. It's you're the fool. You're making me cry.

TEDDIE. You're so damned emotional.

ELIZABETH. Damned emotional yourself. I'm sure you're a rotten business man.

TEDDIE. I don't care what you think. You've made me so awfully happy. I say, what a lark life's going to be!

ELIZABETH. Teddie, you are an angel.

TEDDIE. Let's get out quick. It's no good wasting time. Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. What?

TEDDIE. Nothing. I just like to say Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. You fool!

TEDDIE. I say, can you shoot?

ELIZABETH. No.

TEDDIE. I'll teach you. You don't know how ripping it is to start out from your camp at dawn and travel through the jungle. And you're so tired at night and the sky's all starry. It's a fair treat. Of course I didn't want to say anything about all that till you'd decided. I'd made up my mind to be absolutely practical.

ELIZABETH. [*Chaffing him.*] The only practical thing you said was that love is the only thing that really matters.

TEDDIE. [*Happily.*] Pull the other leg next time, will you? I should have to have one longer than the other.

ELIZABETH. Isn't it fun being in love with some one who's in love with you?

TEDDIE. I say, I think I'd better clear out at once, don't you? It seems rather rotten to stay on in—in this house.

ELIZABETH. You can't go to-night. There's no train.

TEDDIE. I'll go to-morrow. I'll wait in London till you're ready to join me.

ELIZABETH. I'm not going to leave a note on the pin-cushion like Lady Kitty, you know. I'm going to tell Arnold.

TEDDIE. Are you? Don't you think there'll be an awful bother?

ELIZABETH. I must face it. I should hate to be sly and deceitful.

TEDDIE. Well, then, let's face it together.

ELIZABETH. No, I'll talk to Arnold by myself.

TEDDIE. You won't let anyone influence you?

ELIZABETH. No.

[*He holds out his hand and she takes it. They look into one another's eyes with grave, almost solemn affection. There is the sound outside of a car driving up.*

ELIZABETH. There's the car. Arnold's come back. I must go and bathe my eyes. I don't want them to see I've been crying.

TEDDIE. All right. [*As she is going.*] Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. [*Stopping.*] What?

TEDDIE. Bless you.

ELIZABETH. [*Affectionately.*] Idiot!

[*She goes out of the door and* TEDDIE *through the French window into the garden. For an instant the room is empty.* ARNOLD *comes in. He sits down and takes some papers out of his despatch-case.* LADY KITTY *enters. He gets up.*

LADY KITTY. I saw you come in. Oh, my dear, don't get up. There's no reason why you should be so dreadfully polite to me.

ARNOLD. I've just rung for a cup of tea.

LADY KITTY. Perhaps we shall have the chance of a little talk. We don't seem to have had five minutes by ourselves. I want to make your acquaintance, you know.

ARNOLD. I should like you to know that it's not by my wish that my father is here.

LADY KITTY. But I'm so interested to see him.

ARNOLD. I was afraid that you and Lord Porteous must find it embarrassing.

LADY KITTY. Oh, no. Hughie was his greatest friend. They were at Eton and Oxford together. I think your father has improved so much since I saw him last. He wasn't good-looking as a young man, but now he's quite handsome.

[*The* FOOTMAN *brings in a tray on which are tea-things.*

LADY KITTY. Shall I pour it out for you?

ARNOLD. Thank you very much.

LADY KITTY. Do you take sugar?

ARNOLD. No. I gave it up during the war.

LADY KITTY. So wise of you. It's so bad for the figure. Besides being patriotic, of course. Isn't it absurd that I should ask my son if he takes sugar or not? Life is really very quaint. Sad, of course, but oh, so quaint! Often I lie in bed at night and have a good laugh to myself as I think how quaint life is.

ARNOLD. I'm afraid I'm a very serious person.

LADY KITTY. How old are you now, Arnold?

ARNOLD. Thirty-five.

LADY KITTY. Are you really? Of course, I was a child when I married your father.

ARNOLD. Really. He always told me you were twenty-two.

LADY KITTY. Oh, what nonsense! Why, I was married out of the nursery. I put my hair up for the first time on my wedding-day.

ARNOLD. Where is Lord Porteous?

LADY KITTY. My dear, it sounds too absurd to hear

you call him Lord Porteous. Why don't you call him—Uncle Hughie?

ARNOLD. He doesn't happen to be my uncle.

LADY KITTY. No, but he's your godfather. You know, I'm sure you'll like him when you know him better. I'm so hoping that you and Elizabeth will come and stay with us in Florence. I simply adore Elizabeth. She's too beautiful.

ARNOLD. Her hair is very pretty.

LADY KITTY. It's not touched up, is it?

ARNOLD. Oh, no.

LADY KITTY. I just wondered. It's rather a coincidence that her hair should be the same colour as mine. I suppose it shows that your father and you are attracted by just the same thing. So interesting, heredity, isn't it?

ARNOLD. Very.

LADY KITTY. Of course, since I joined the Catholic Church I don't believe in it any more. Darwin and all that sort of thing. Too dreadful. Wicked, you know. Besides, it's not very good form, is it?

[CHAMPION-CHENEY *comes in from the garden.*

C.-C. Do I intrude?

LADY KITTY. Come in, Clive. Arnold and I have been having such a wonderful heart-to-heart talk.

C.-C. Very nice.

ARNOLD. Father, I stepped in for a moment at the Harveys' on my way back. It's simply criminal what they're doing with that house.

C.-C. What are they doing?

ARNOLD. It's an almost perfect Georgian house and they've got a lot of dreadful Victorian furniture. I gave them my ideas on the subject, but it's quite hopeless. They said they were attached to their furniture.

C.-C. Arnold should have been an interior decorator.

LADY KITTY. He has wonderful taste. He gets that from me.

ARNOLD. I suppose I have a certain *flair*. I have a passion for decorating houses.

LADY KITTY. You've made this one charming.

C.-C. D'you remember, we just had chintzes and comfortable chairs when we lived here, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. Perfectly hideous, wasn't it?

C.-C. In those days gentlemen and ladies were not expected to have taste.

ARNOLD. You know, I've been looking at this chair again. Since Lord Porteous said the legs weren't right I've been very uneasy.

LADY KITTY. He only said that because he was in a bad temper.

C.-C. His temper seems to me very short these days, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. Oh, it is.

ARNOLD. You feel he knows what he's talking about. I gave seventy-five pounds for that chair. I'm very seldom taken in. I always think if a thing's right you feel it.

C.-C. Well, don't let it disturb your night's rest.

ARNOLD. But, my dear father, that's just what it does. I had a most horrible dream about it last night.

LADY KITTY. Here is Hughie.

ARNOLD. I'm going to fetch a book I have on Old English furniture. There's an illustration of a chair which is almost identical with this one.

[PORTEOUS *comes in.*

PORTEOUS. Quite a family gathering, by George!

C.-C. I was thinking just now we'd make a very pleasing picture of a typical English home.

ARNOLD. I'll be back in five minutes. There's something I want to show you, Lord Porteous.

[*He goes out.*

C.-C. Would you like to play piquet with me, Hughie?

PORTEOUS. Not particularly.

C.-C. You were never much of a piquet player, were you?

PORTEOUS. My dear Clive, you people don't know what piquet is in England.

C.-C. Let's have a game then. You may make money.

PORTEOUS. I don't want to play with you.

LADY KITTY. I don't know why not, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Let me tell you that I don't like your manner.

C.-C. I'm sorry for that. I'm afraid I can't offer to change it at my age.

PORTEOUS. I don't know what you want to be hanging around here for.

C.-C. A natural attachment to my home.

PORTEOUS. If you'd had any tact you'd have kept out of the way while we were here.

C.-C. My dear Hughie, I don't understand your attitude at all. If I'm willing to let bygones be bygones why should you object?

PORTEOUS. Damn it all, they're not bygones.

C.-C. After all, I am the injured party.

PORTEOUS. How the devil are you the injured party?

C.-C. Well, you did run away with my wife, didn't you?

LADY KITTY. Now, don't let's go into ancient history. I can't see why we shouldn't all be friends.

PORTEOUS. I beg you not to interfere, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. I'm very fond of Clive.

PORTEOUS. You never cared two straws for Clive. You only say that to irritate me.

LADY KITTY. Not at all. I don't see why he shouldn't come and stay with us.

C.-C. I'd love to. I think Florence in spring-time is delightful. Have you central heating?

PORTEOUS. I never liked you, I don't like you now, and I never shall like you.

C.-C. How very unfortunate! because I liked you, I like you now, and I shall continue to like you.

LADY KITTY. There's something very nice about you, Clive.

PORTEOUS. If you think that, why the devil did you leave him?

LADY KITTY. Are you going to reproach me because I loved you? How utterly, utterly, utterly detestable you are!

C.-C. Now, now, don't quarrel with one another.

LADY KITTY. It's all his fault. I'm the easiest person in the world to live with. But really he'd try the patience of a saint.

C.-C. Come, come, don't get upset, Kitty. When two people live together there must be a certain amount of give and take.

PORTEOUS. I don't know what the devil you're talking about.

C.-C. It hasn't escaped my observation that you are a little inclined to frip. Many couples are. I think it's a pity.

PORTEOUS. Would you have the very great kindness to mind your own business?

LADY KITTY. It is his business. He naturally wants me to be happy.

C.-C. I have the very greatest affection for Kitty.

PORTEOUS. Then why the devil didn't you look after her properly?

C.-C. My dear Hughie, you were my greatest friend. I trusted you. It may have been rash.

PORTEOUS. It was inexcusable.

LADY KITTY. I don't know what you mean by that, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Don't, don't, don't try and bully me, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. Oh, I know what you mean.

PORTEOUS. Then why the devil did you say you didn't?

LADY KITTY. When I think that I sacrificed everything for that man! And for thirty years I've had to live in a filthy marble palace with no sanitary conveniences.

C.-C. D'you mean to say you haven't got a bathroom?

LADY KITTY. I've had to wash in a tub.

C.-C. My poor Kitty, how you've suffered!

PORTEOUS. Really, Kitty, I'm sick of hearing of the sacrifices you made. I suppose you think I sacrificed nothing. I should have been Prime Minister by now if it hadn't been for you.

LADY KITTY. Nonsense!

PORTEOUS. What do you mean by that? Everyone said I should be Prime Minister. Shouldn't I have been Prime Minister, Clive?

C.-C. It was certainly the general expectation.

PORTEOUS. I was the most promising young man of my day. I was bound to get a seat in the Cabinet at the next election.

LADY KITTY. They'd have found you out just as I've found you out. I'm sick of hearing that I ruined your career. You never had a career to ruin. Prime Minister! You haven't the brain. You haven't the character.

C.-C. Cheek, push, and a gift of the gab will serve very well instead, you know.

LADY KITTY. Besides, in politics it's not the men that matter. It's the women at the back of them. I could have made Clive a Cabinet Minister if I'd wanted to.

PORTEOUS. Clive?

LADY KITTY. With my beauty, my charm, my force of character, my wit, I could have done anything.

PORTEOUS. Clive was nothing but my political secretary. When I was Prime Minister I might have made him Governor of some Colony or other. Western Australia, say. Out of pure kindliness.

LADY KITTY. [*With flashing eyes.*] D'you think I would have buried myself in Western Australia? With my beauty? My charm?

PORTEOUS. Or Barbadoes, perhaps.

LADY KITTY. [*Furiously.*] Barbadoes! Barbadoes can go to—Barbadoes.

PORTEOUS. That's all you'd have got.

LADY KITTY. Nonsense! I'd have India.

PORTEOUS. I would never have given you India.

LADY KITTY. You would have given me India.

PORTEOUS. I tell you I wouldn't.

LADY KITTY. The King would have given me India. The nation would have insisted on my having India. I would have been a vice-reine or nothing.

PORTEOUS. I tell you that as long as the interests of the British Empire—Damn it all, my teeth are coming out!

[*He hurries from the room.*

LADY KITTY. It's too much. I can't bear it any more. I've put up with him for thirty years and now I'm at the end of my tether.

C.-C. Calm yourself, my dear Kitty.

LADY KITTY. I won't listen to a word. I've quite made up my mind. It's finished, finished, finished. [*With a change of tone.*] I was so touched when I heard that you never lived in this house again after I left it.

C.-C. The cuckoos have always been very plentiful. Their note has a personal application which, I must say, I have found extremely offensive.

LADY KITTY. When I saw that you didn't marry again I couldn't help thinking that you still loved me.

C.-C. I am one of the few men I know who is able to profit by experience.

LADY KITTY. In the eyes of the Church I am still your wife. The Church is so wise. It knows that in the end a woman always comes back to her first love. Clive, I am willing to return to you.

C.-C. My dear Kitty, I couldn't take advantage of your momentary vexation with Hughie to let you take a step which I know you would bitterly regret.

LADY KITTY. You've waited for me a long time. For Arnold's sake.

C.-C. Do you think we really need bother about Arnold? In the last thirty years he's had time to grow used to the situation.

LADY KITTY. [*With a little smile.*] I think I've sown my wild oats, Clive.

C.-C. I haven't. I was a good young man, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. I know.

C.-C. And I'm very glad, because it has enabled me to be a wicked old one.

LADY KITTY. I beg your pardon.

[ARNOLD *comes in with a large book in his hand.*

ARNOLD. I say, I've found the book I was hunting for. Oh! isn't Lord Porteous here?

LADY KITTY. One moment, Arnold. Your father and I are busy.

ARNOLD. I'm so sorry.

[*He goes out into the garden.*

LADY KITTY. Explain yourself, Clive.

C.-C. When you ran away from me, Kitty, I was sore and angry and miserable. But above all I felt a fool.

LADY KITTY. Men are so vain.

C.-C. But I was a student of history, and presently I reflected that I shared my misfortune with very nearly all the greatest men.

LADY KITTY. I'm a great reader myself. It has always struck me as peculiar.

C.-C. The explanation is very simple. Women dislike intelligence, and when they find it in their husbands they revenge themselves on them in the only way they can, by making them—well, what you made me.

LADY KITTY. It's ingenious. It may be true.

C.-C. I felt I had done my duty by society and I determined to devote the rest of my life to my own entertainment. The House of Commons had always bored me excessively and the scandal of our divorce gave me an opportunity to resign my seat. I have been relieved to find that the country got on perfectly well without me.

LADY KITTY. But has love never entered your life?

C.-C. Tell me frankly, Kitty, don't you think people make a lot of unnecessary fuss about love?

LADY KITTY. It's the most wonderful thing in the world.

C.-C. You're incorrigible. Do you really think it was worth sacrificing so much for?

LADY KITTY. My dear Clive, I don't mind telling you that if I had my time over again I should be unfaithful to you, but I should not leave you.

C.-C. For some years I was notoriously the prey of a secret sorrow. But I found so many charming creatures who were anxious to console that in the end it grew rather fatiguing. Out of regard to my health I ceased to frequent the drawing-rooms of Mayfair.

LADY KITTY. And since then?

C.-C. Since then I have allowed myself the luxury of assisting financially a succession of dear little things, in a somewhat humble sphere, between the ages of twenty and twenty-five.

LADY KITTY. I cannot understand the infatuation of men for young girls. I think they're so dull.

C.-C. It's a matter of taste. I love old wine, old friends and old books, but I like young women. On their twenty-fifth birthday I give them a diamond ring and tell them they must no longer waste their youth and beauty on an old fogey like me. We have a most affecting scene, my technique on these occasions is perfect, and then I start all over again.

LADY KITTY. You're a wicked old man, Clive.

C.-C. That's what I told you. But, by George! I'm a happy one.

LADY KITTY. There's only one course open to me now.

C.-C. What is that?

LADY KITTY. [*With a flashing smile.*] To go and dress for dinner.

C.-C. Capital. I will follow your example.

[*As* LADY KITTY *goes out* ELIZABETH *comes in.*

ELIZABETH. Where is Arnold?

C.-C. He's on the terrace. I'll call him.

ELIZABETH. Don't bother.

C.-C. I was just strolling along to my cottage to put on a dinner jacket. [*As he goes out.*] Arnold.

[*Exit* C.-C.

ARNOLD. Hulloa! [*He comes in.*] Oh, Elizabeth, I've found an illustration here of a chair which is almost identical with mine. It's dated 1750. Look!

ELIZABETH. That's very interesting.

ARNOLD. I want to show it to Porteous. [*Moving a chair which has been misplaced.*] You know, it does exasperate me the way people will not leave things alone. I no sooner put a thing in its place than somebody moves it.

ELIZABETH. It must be maddening for you.

ARNOLD. It is. You are the worst offender. I can't think why you don't take the pride that I do in the house. After all, it's one of the show places in the county.

ELIZABETH. I'm afraid you find me very unsatisfactory.

ARNOLD. [*Good-humouredly.*] I don't know about that. But my two subjects are politics and decoration. I should be a perfect fool if I didn't see that you don't care two straws about either.

ELIZABETH. We haven't very much in common, Arnold, have we?

ARNOLD. I don't think you can blame me for that.

ELIZABETH. I don't. I blame you for nothing. I have no fault to find with you.

ARNOLD. [*Surprised at her significant tone.*] Good gracious me! what's the meaning of all this?

ELIZABETH. Well, I don't think there's any object in beating about the bush. I want you to let me go.

ARNOLD. Go where?

ELIZABETH. Away. For always.

ARNOLD. My dear child, what *are* you talking about?

ELIZABETH. I want to be free.

ARNOLD. [*Amused rather than disconcerted.*] Don't be ridiculous, darling. I daresay you're run down and want

a change. I'll take you over to Paris for a fortnight if you like.

ELIZABETH. I shouldn't have spoken to you if I hadn't quite made up my mind. We've been married for three years and I don't think it's been a great success. I'm frankly bored by the life you want me to lead.

ARNOLD. Well, if you'll allow me to say so, the fault is yours. We lead a very distinguished, useful life. We know a lot of extremely nice people.

ELIZABETH. I'm quite willing to allow that the fault is mine. But how does that make it any better? I'm only twenty-five. If I've made a mistake I have time to correct it.

ARNOLD. I can't bring myself to take you very seriously.

ELIZABETH. You see, I don't love you.

ARNOLD. Well, I'm awfully sorry. But you weren't obliged to marry me. You've made your bed and I'm afraid you must lie on it.

ELIZABETH. That's one of the falsest proverbs in the English language. Why should you lie on the bed you've made if you don't want to? There's always the floor.

ARNOLD. For goodness' sake don't be funny, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I've quite made up my mind to leave you, Arnold.

ARNOLD. Come, come, Elizabeth, you must be sensible. You haven't any reason to leave me.

ELIZABETH. Why should you wish to keep a woman tied to you who wants to be free?

ARNOLD. I happen to be in love with you.

ELIZABETH. You might have said that before.

ARNOLD. I thought you'd take it for granted. You can't expect a man to go on making love to his wife after three years. I'm very busy. I'm awfully keen on politics and I've worked like a dog to make this house a thing of beauty. After all, a man marries to have a home, but also because he doesn't want to be bothered with sex and

all that sort of thing. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you and I've been in love ever since.

ELIZABETH. I'm sorry, but if you're not in love with a man his love doesn't mean very much to you.

ARNOLD. It's so ungrateful. I've done everything in the world for you.

ELIZABETH. You've been very kind to me. But you've asked me to lead a life I don't like and that I'm not suited for. I'm awfully sorry to cause you pain, but now you must let me go.

ARNOLD. Nonsense! I'm a good deal older than you are and I think I have a little more sense. In your interests as well as in mine I'm not going to do anything of the sort.

ELIZABETH. [*With a smile.*] How can you prevent me? You can't keep me under lock and key.

ARNOLD. Please don't talk to me as if I were a foolish child. You're my wife and you're going to remain my wife.

ELIZABETH. What sort of a life do you think we should lead? Do you think there'd be any more happiness for you than for me?

ARNOLD. But what is it precisely that you suggest?

ELIZABETH. Well, I want you to let me divorce you.

ARNOLD. [*Astounded.*] Me? Thank you very much. Are you under the impression I'm going to sacrifice my career for a whim of yours?

ELIZABETH. How will it do that?

ARNOLD. My seat's wobbly enough as it is. Do you think I'd be able to hold it if I were in a divorce case? Even if it were a put-up job, as most divorces are nowadays, it would damn me.

ELIZABETH. It's rather hard on a woman to be divorced.

ARNOLD. [*With sudden suspicion.*] What do you mean by that? Are you in love with some one?

ELIZABETH. Yes.

ARNOLD. Who?

ELIZABETH. Teddie Luton.

[*He is astonished for a moment, then bursts into a laugh.*

ARNOLD. My poor child, how can you be so ridiculous? Why, he hasn't a bob. He's a perfectly commonplace young man. It's so absurd I can't even be angry with you.

ELIZABETH. I've fallen desperately in love with him, Arnold.

ARNOLD. Well, you'd better fall desperately out.

ELIZABETH. He wants to marry me.

ARNOLD. I daresay he does. He can go to hell.

ELIZABETH. It's no good talking like that.

ARNOLD. Is he your lover?

ELIZABETH. No, certainly not.

ARNOLD. It shows that he's a mean skunk to take advantage of my hospitality to make love to you.

ELIZABETH. He's never even kissed me.

ARNOLD. I'd try telling that to the horse marines if I were you.

ELIZABETH. It's because I wanted to do nothing shabby that I told you straight out how things were.

ARNOLD. How long have you been thinking of this?

ELIZABETH. I've been in love with Teddie ever since I knew him.

ARNOLD. And you never thought of me at all, I suppose.

ELIZABETH. Oh, yes, I did. I was miserable. But I can't help myself. I wish I loved you, but I don't.

ARNOLD. I recommend you to think very carefully before you do anything foolish.

ELIZABETH. I have thought very carefully.

ARNOLD. By God! I don't know why I don't give you a sound hiding. I'm not sure if that wouldn't be the best thing to bring you to your senses.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold, don't take it like that.

ARNOLD. How do you expect me to take it? You come to me quite calmly and say: "I've had enough of you. We've been married three years and I think I'd like to marry somebody else now. Shall I break up your home?

What a bore for you! Do you mind my divorcing you? It'll smash up your career, will it? What a pity!" Oh, no, my girl, I may be a fool, but I'm not a damned fool.

ELIZABETH. Teddie is leaving here by the first train to-morrow. I warn you that I mean to join him as soon as he can make the necessary arrangements.

ARNOLD. Where is he?

ELIZABETH. I don't know. I suppose he's in his room.

[ARNOLD *goes to the door and calls.*

ARNOLD. George!

[*For a moment he walks up and down the room impatiently.* ELIZABETH *watches him. The* FOOTMAN *comes in.*

FOOTMAN. Yes, sir.

ARNOLD. Tell Mr. Luton to come here at once.

ELIZABETH. Ask Mr. Luton if he wouldn't mind coming here for a moment.

FOOTMAN. Very good, madam.

[*Exit* FOOTMAN.

ELIZABETH. What are you going to say to him?

ARNOLD. That's my business.

ELIZABETH. I wouldn't make a scene if I were you.

ARNOLD. I'm not going to make a scene.

[*They wait in silence.*

Why did you insist on my mother coming here?

ELIZABETH. It seemed to me rather absurd to take up the attitude that I should be contaminated by her when . . .

ARNOLD. [*Interrupting.*] When you were proposing to do exactly the same thing. Well, now you've seen her what do you think of her? Do you think it's been a success? Is that the sort of woman a man would like his mother to be?

ELIZABETH. I've been ashamed. I've been so sorry. It all seemed dreadful and horrible. This morning I happened to notice a rose in the garden. It was all overblown and bedraggled. It looked like a painted old woman. And I remembered that I'd looked at it a day

or two ago. It was lovely then, fresh and blooming and fragrant. It may be hideous now, but that doesn't take away from the beauty it had once. That was real.

ARNOLD. Poetry, by God! As if this were the moment for poetry!

[TEDDIE *comes in. He has changed into a dinner jacket.*

TEDDIE. [*To* ELIZABETH.] Did you want me?

ARNOLD. *I* sent for you.

[TEDDIE *looks from* ARNOLD *to* ELIZABETH. *He sees that something has happened.*

When would it be convenient for you to leave this house?

TEDDIE. I was proposing to go to-morrow morning. But I can very well go at once if you like.

ARNOLD. I do like.

TEDDIE. Very well. Is there anything else you wish to say to me?

ARNOLD. Do you think it was a very honourable thing to come down here and make love to my wife?

TEDDIE. No, I don't. I haven't been very happy about it. That's why I wanted to go away.

ARNOLD. Upon my word you're cool.

TEDDIE. I'm afraid it's no good saying I'm sorry and that sort of thing. You know what the situation is.

ARNOLD. Is it true that you want to marry Elizabeth?

TEDDIE. Yes. I should like to marry her as soon as ever I can.

ARNOLD. Have you thought of me at all? Has it struck you that you're destroying my home and breaking up my happiness?

TEDDIE. I don't see how there could be much happiness for you if Elizabeth doesn't care for you.

ARNOLD. Let me tell you that I refuse to have my home broken up by a twopenny-halfpenny adventurer who takes advantage of a foolish woman. I refuse to allow myself to be divorced. I can't prevent my wife from going off with you if she's determined to make a damned fool of

herself, but this I tell you: nothing will induce me to divorce her.

ELIZABETH. Arnold, that would be monstrous.

TEDDIE. We could force you.

ARNOLD. How?

TEDDIE. If we went away together openly you'd have to bring an action.

ARNOLD. Twenty-four hours after you leave this house I shall go down to Brighton with a chorus-girl. And neither you nor I will be able to get a divorce. We've had enough divorces in our family. And now get out, get out, get out!

[TEDDIE *looks uncertainly at* ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH. [*With a little smile.*] Don't bother about me. I shall be all right.

ARNOLD. Get out! Get out!

END OF THE SECOND ACT

# THE THIRD ACT

## THE THIRD ACT

*The Scene is the same as in the preceding Acts.*
*It is the night of the same day as that on which takes place the action of the second Act.*

CHAMPION-CHENEY *and* ARNOLD, *both in dinner jackets, are discovered.* CHAMPION-CHENEY *is seated.* ARNOLD *walks restlessly up and down the room.*

C.-C. I think, if you'll follow my advice to the letter, you'll probably work the trick.

ARNOLD. I don't like it, you know. It's against all my principles.

C.-C. My dear Arnold, we all hope that you have before you a distinguished political career. You can't learn too soon that the most useful thing about a principle is that it can always be sacrificed to expediency.

ARNOLD. But supposing it doesn't come off? Women are incalculable.

C.-C. Nonsense! Men are romantic. A woman will always sacrifice herself if you give her the opportunity. It is her favourite form of self-indulgence.

ARNOLD. I never know whether you're a humorist or a cynic, father.

C.-C. I'm neither, my dear boy; I'm merely a very truthful man. But people are so unused to the truth that they're apt to mistake it for a joke or a sneer.

ARNOLD. [*Irritably.*] It seems so unfair that this should happen to me.

C.-C. Keep your head, my boy, and do what I tell you.

[LADY KITTY *and* ELIZABETH *come in.* LADY KITTY *is in a gorgeous evening gown.*

ELIZABETH. Where is Lord Porteous?

C.-C. He's on the terrace. He's smoking a cigar. [*Going to window.*] Hughie!

[PORTEOUS *comes in.*

PORTEOUS. [*With a grunt.*] Yes? Where's Mrs. Shenstone?

ELIZABETH. Oh, she had a headache. She's gone to bed.

[*When* PORTEOUS *comes in* LADY KITTY *with a very haughty air purses her lips and takes up an illustrated paper.* PORTEOUS *gives her an irritated look, takes another illustrated paper and sits himself down at the other end of the room. They are not on speaking terms.*

C.-C. Arnold and I have just been down to my cottage.

ELIZABETH. I wondered where you'd gone.

C.-C. I came across an old photograph album this afternoon. I meant to bring it along before dinner, but I forgot, so we went and fetched it.

ELIZABETH. Oh, do let me see it! I love old photographs.

[*He gives her the album, and she, sitting down, puts it on her knees and begins to turn over the pages. He stands over her.* LADY KITTY *and* PORTEOUS *take surreptitious glances at one another.*

C.-C. I thought it might amuse you to see what pretty women looked like five-and-thirty years ago. That was the day of beautiful women.

ELIZABETH. Do you think they were more beautiful then than they are now?

C.-C. Oh, much. Now you see lots of pretty little things, but very few beautiful women.

ELIZABETH. Aren't their clothes funny?

C.-C. [*Pointing to a photograph.*] That's Mrs. Langtry.

ELIZABETH. She has a lovely nose.

C.-C. She was the most wonderful thing you ever saw. Dowagers used to jump on chairs in order to get

a good look at her when she came into a drawing-room. I was riding with her once, and we had to have the gates of the livery stable closed when she was getting on her horse because the crowd was so great.

ELIZABETH. And who's that?

C.-C. Lady Lonsdale. That's Lady Dudley.

ELIZABETH. This is an actress, isn't it?

C.-C. It is, indeed. Ellen Terry. By George! how I loved that woman!

ELIZABETH. [*With a smile.*] Dear Ellen Terry!

C.-C. That's Bwabs. I never saw a smarter man in my life. And Oliver Montagu. Henry Manners with his eye-glass.

ELIZABETH. Nice-looking, isn't he? And this?

C.-C. That's Mary Anderson. I wish you could have seen her in "A Winter's Tale." Her beauty just took your breath away. And look! There's Lady Randolph. Bernal Osborne—the wittiest man I ever knew.

ELIZABETH. I think it's too sweet. I love their absurd bustles and those tight sleeves.

C.-C. What figures they had! In those days a woman wasn't supposed to be as thin as a rail and as flat as a pancake.

ELIZABETH. Oh, but aren't they laced in? How could they bear it?

C.-C. They didn't play golf then, and nonsense like that, you know. They hunted, in a tall hat and a long black habit, and they were very gracious and charitable to the poor in the village.

ELIZABETH. Did the poor like it?

C.-C. They had a very thin time if they didn't. When they were in London they drove in the Park every afternoon, and they went to ten-course dinners, where they never met anybody they didn't know. And they had their box at the opera when Patti was singing or Madame Albani.

ELIZABETH. Oh, what a lovely little thing! Who on earth is that?

C.-C. That?

ELIZABETH. She looks so fragile, like a piece of exquisite china, with all those furs on and her face up against her muff, and the snow falling.

C.-C. Yes, there was quite a rage at that time for being taken in an artificial snowstorm.

ELIZABETH. What a sweet smile, so roguish and frank, and debonair! Oh, I wish I looked like that! Do tell me who it is!

C.-C. Don't you know?

ELIZABETH. No.

C.-C. Why—it's Kitty.

ELIZABETH. Lady Kitty! [*To* LADY KITTY.] Oh, my dear, do look! It's too ravishing. [*She takes the album over to her impulsively.*] Why didn't you tell me you looked like that? Everybody must have been in love with you.

[LADY KITTY *takes the album and looks at it. Then she lets it slip from her hands and covers her face with her hands. She is crying.*

[*In consternation.*] My dear, what's the matter? Oh, what have I done? I'm so sorry.

LADY KITTY. Don't, don't talk to me. Leave me alone. It's stupid of me.

[ELIZABETH *looks at her for a moment perplexed, then, turning round, slips her arm in* CHAMPION-CHENEY'S *and leads him out on to the terrace.*

ELIZABETH. [*As they are going, in a whisper.*] Did you do that on purpose?

[PORTEOUS *gets up and goes over to* LADY KITTY. *He puts his hand on her shoulder. They remain thus for a little while.*

PORTEOUS. I'm afraid I was very rude to you before dinner, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. [*Taking his hand which is on her shoulder.*] It doesn't matter. I'm sure I was very exasperating.

PORTEOUS. I didn't mean what I said, you know.

LADY KITTY. Neither did I.

PORTEOUS. Of course I know that I'd never have been Prime Minister.

LADY KITTY. How can you talk such nonsense, Hughie? No one would have had a chance if you'd remained in politics.

PORTEOUS. I haven't the character.

LADY KITTY. You have more character than anyone I've ever met.

PORTEOUS. Besides, I don't know that I much wanted to be Prime Minister.

LADY KITTY. Oh, but I should have been so proud of you. Of course you'd have been Prime Minister.

PORTEOUS. I'd have given you India, you know. I think it would have been a very popular appointment.

LADY KITTY. I don't care twopence about India. I'd have been quite content with Western Australia.

PORTEOUS. My dear, you don't think I'd have let you bury yourself in Western Australia?

LADY KITTY. Or Barbadoes.

PORTEOUS. Never. It sounds like a cure for flat feet. I'd have kept you in London.

*[He picks up the album and is about to look at the photograph of Lady Kitty. She puts her hand over it.*

LADY KITTY. No, don't look.

*[He takes her hand away.*

PORTEOUS. Don't be so silly.

LADY KITTY. Isn't it hateful to grow old?

PORTEOUS. You know, you haven't changed much.

LADY KITTY. [*Enchanted.*] Oh, Hughie, how can you talk such nonsense?

PORTEOUS. Of course you're a little more mature, but that's all. A woman's all the better for being rather mature.

LADY KITTY. Do you really think that?

PORTEOUS. Upon my soul I do.

LADY KITTY. You're not saying it just to please me?

PORTEOUS. No, no.

LADY KITTY. Let me look at the photograph again.

[*She takes the album and looks at the photograph complacently.*

The fact is, if your bones are good, age doesn't really matter. You'll always be beautiful.

PORTEOUS. [*With a little smile, almost as if he were talking to a child.*] It was silly of you to cry.

LADY KITTY. It hasn't made my eyelashes run, has it?

PORTEOUS. Not a bit.

LADY KITTY. It's very good stuff I use now. They don't stick together either.

PORTEOUS. Look here, Kitty, how much longer do you want to stay here?

LADY KITTY. Oh, I'm quite ready to go whenever you like.

PORTEOUS. Clive gets on my nerves. I don't like the way he keeps hanging about you.

LADY KITTY. [*Surprised, rather amused, and delighted.*] Hughie, you don't mean to say you're jealous of poor Clive?

PORTEOUS. Of course I'm not jealous of him, but he does look at you in a way that I can't help thinking rather objectionable.

LADY KITTY. Hughie, you may throw me downstairs like Amy Robsart; you may drag me about the floor by the hair of my head; I don't care, you're jealous. I shall never grow old.

PORTEOUS. Damn it all, the man was your husband.

LADY KITTY. My dear Hughie, he never had your style. Why, the moment you come into a room everyone looks and says: "Who the devil is that?"

PORTEOUS. What? You think that, do you? Well, I daresay there's something in what you say. These damned Radicals can say what they like, but, by God, Kitty! when a man's a gentleman—well, damn it all, you know what I mean.

LADY KITTY. I think Clive has degenerated dreadfully since we left him.

PORTEOUS. What do you say to making a bee-line for Italy and going to San Michele?

LADY KITTY. Oh, Hughie! It's years since we were there.

PORTEOUS. Wouldn't you like to see it again—just once more?

LADY KITTY. Do you remember the first time we went? It was the most heavenly place I'd ever seen. We'd only left England a month, and I said I'd like to spend all my life there.

PORTEOUS. Of course I remember. And in a fortnight it was yours, lock, stock and barrel.

LADY KITTY. We were very happy there, Hughie.

PORTEOUS. Let's go back once more.

LADY KITTY. I daren't. It must be all peopled with the ghosts of our past. One should never go again to a place where one has been happy. It would break my heart.

PORTEOUS. Do you remember how we used to sit on the terrace of the old castle and look at the Adriatic? We might have been the only people in the world, you and I, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. [*Tragically.*] And we thought our love would last for ever.

[*Enter* CHAMPION-CHENEY.

PORTEOUS. Is there any chance of bridge this evening?

C.-C. I don't think we can make up a four.

PORTEOUS. What a nuisance that boy went away like that! He wasn't a bad player.

C.-C. Teddie Luton?

LADY KITTY. I think it was very funny his going without saying good-bye to anyone.

C.-C. The young men of the present day are very casual.

PORTEOUS. I thought there was no train in the evening.

C.-C. There isn't. The last train leaves at 5.45.

PORTEOUS. How did he go then?

C.-C. He went.

PORTEOUS. Damned selfish I call it.

LADY KITTY. [*Intrigued.*] Why did he go, Clive?

[CHAMPION-CHENEY *looks at her for a moment reflectively.*

C.-C. I have something very grave to say to you. Elizabeth wants to leave Arnold.

LADY KITTY. Clive! What on earth for?

C.-C. She's in love with Teddie Luton. That's why he went. The men of my family are really very unfortunate.

PORTEOUS. Does she want to run away with him?

LADY KITTY. [*With consternation.*] My dear, what's to be done?

C.-C. I think you can do a great deal.

LADY KITTY. I? What?

C.-C. Tell her, tell her what it means.

[*He looks at her fixedly. She stares at him.*

LADY KITTY. Oh, no, no!

C.-C. She's a child. Not for Arnold's sake. For her sake. You must.

LADY KITTY. You don't know what you're asking.

C.-C. Yes, I do.

LADY KITTY. Hughie, what shall I do?

PORTEOUS. Do what you like. I shall never blame you for anything.

[*The* FOOTMAN *comes in with a letter on a salver. He hesitates on seeing that* ELIZABETH *is not in the room.*

C.-C. What is it?

FOOTMAN. I was looking for Mrs. Champion-Cheney, sir.

C.-C. She's not here. Is that a letter?

FOOTMAN. Yes, sir. It's just been sent up from the "Champion Arms."

C.-C. Leave it. I'll give it to Mrs. Cheney.

FOOTMAN. Very good, sir.

[*He brings the tray to* CLIVE, *who takes the letter. The* FOOTMAN *goes out.*

PORTEOUS. Is the "Champion Arms" the local pub?

C.-C. [*Looking at the letter.*] It's by way of being a hotel, but I never heard of anyone staying there.

LADY KITTY. If there was no train I suppose he had to go there.

C.-C. Great minds. I wonder what he has to write about! [*He goes to the door leading on to the garden.*] Elizabeth!

ELIZABETH. [*Outside.*] Yes.

C.-C. Here's a note for you.

[*There is silence. They wait for* ELIZABETH *to come. She enters.*

ELIZABETH. It's lovely in the garden to-night.

C.-C. They've just sent this up from the "Champion Arms."

ELIZABETH. Thank you.

[*Without embarrassment she opens the letter. They watch her while she reads it. It covers three pages. She puts it away in her bag.*

LADY KITTY. Hughie, I wish you'd fetch me a cloak. I'd like to take a little stroll in the garden, but after thirty years in Italy I find these English summers rather chilly.

[*Without a word* PORTEOUS *goes out.* ELIZABETH *is lost in thought.*

I want to talk to Elizabeth, Clive.

C.-C. I'll leave you.

[*He goes out.*

LADY KITTY. What does he say?

ELIZABETH. Who?

LADY KITTY. Mr. Luton.

ELIZABETH. [*Gives a little start. Then she looks at* LADY KITTY.] They've told you?

LADY KITTY. Yes. And now they have I think I knew it all along.

ELIZABETH. I don't expect you to have much sympathy for me. Arnold is your son.

LADY KITTY. So pitifully little.

ELIZABETH. I'm not suited for this sort of existence. Arnold wants me to take what he calls my place in Society. Oh, I get so bored with those parties in London. All those middle-aged painted women, in beautiful clothes, lolloping round ball-rooms with rather old young men. And the endless luncheons where they gossip about so-and-so's love affairs.

LADY KITTY. Are you very much in love with Mr. Luton?

ELIZABETH. I love him with all my heart.

LADY KITTY. And he?

ELIZABETH. He's never cared for anyone but me. He never will.

LADY KITTY. Will Arnold let you divorce him?

ELIZABETH. No, he won't hear of it. He refuses even to divorce me.

LADY KITTY. Why?

ELIZABETH. He thinks a scandal will revive all the old gossip.

LADY KITTY. Oh, my poor child!

ELIZABETH. It can't be helped. I'm quite willing to accept the consequences.

LADY KITTY. You don't know what it is to have a man tied to you only by his honour. When married people don't get on they can separate, but if they're not married it's impossible. It's a tie that only death can sever.

ELIZABETH. If Teddie stopped caring for me I shouldn't want him to stay with me for five minutes.

LADY KITTY. One says that when one's sure of a man's love, but when one isn't any more—oh, it's so different. In those circumstances one's got to keep a man's love. It's the only thing one has.

ELIZABETH. I'm a human being. I can stand on my own feet.

LADY KITTY. Have you any money of your own?

ELIZABETH. None.

LADY KITTY. Then how can you stand on your own feet? You think I'm a silly, frivolous woman, but I've learned something in a bitter school. They can make what laws they like, they can give us the suffrage, but when you come down to bedrock it's the man who pays the piper who calls the tune. Woman will only be the equal of man when she earns her living in the same way that he does.

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] It sounds rather funny to hear you talk like that.

LADY KITTY. A cook who marries a butler can snap her fingers in his face because she can earn just as much as he can. But a woman in your position and a woman in mine will always be dependent on the men who keep them.

ELIZABETH. I don't want luxury. You don't know how sick I am of all this beautiful furniture. These over-decorated houses are like a prison in which I can't breathe. When I drive about in a Callot frock and a Rolls-Royce I envy the shop-girl in a coat and skirt whom I see jumping on the tailboard of a bus.

LADY KITTY. You mean that if need be you could earn your own living?

ELIZABETH. Yes.

LADY KITTY. What could you be? A nurse or a typist. It's nonsense. Luxury saps a woman's nerve. And when she's known it once it becomes a necessity.

ELIZABETH. That depends on the woman.

LADY KITTY. When we're young we think we're different from everyone else, but when we grow a little older we discover we're all very much of a muchness.

ELIZABETH. You're very kind to take so much trouble about me.

LADY KITTY. It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made.

ELIZABETH. Oh, don't say it was that, don't, don't.

LADY KITTY. Look at me, Elizabeth, and look at Hughie. Do you think it's been a success? If I had my time over again do you think I'd do it again? Do you think he would?

ELIZABETH. You see, you don't know how much I love Teddie.

LADY KITTY. And do you think I didn't love Hughie? Do you think he didn't love me?

ELIZABETH. I'm sure he did.

LADY KITTY. Oh, of course in the beginning it was heavenly. We felt so brave and adventurous and we were so much in love. The first two years were wonderful. People cut me, you know, but I didn't mind. I thought love was everything. It *is* a little uncomfortable when you come upon an old friend and go towards her eagerly, so glad to see her, and are met with an icy stare.

ELIZABETH. Do you think friends like that are worth having?

LADY KITTY. Perhaps they're not very sure of themselves. Perhaps they're honestly shocked. It's a test one had better not put one's friends to if one can help it. It's rather bitter to find how few one has.

ELIZABETH. But one has some.

LADY KITTY. Yes, they ask you to come and see them when they're quite certain no one will be there who might object to meeting you. Or else they say to you: "My dear, you know I'm devoted to you, and I wouldn't mind at all, but my girl's growing up—I'm sure you understand; you won't think it unkind of me if I don't ask you to the house?"

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling.*] That doesn't seem to me very serious.

LADY KITTY. At first I thought it rather a relief, because it threw Hughie and me together more. But you know, men are very funny. Even when they are in love they're not in love all day long. They want change and recreation.

ELIZABETH. I'm not inclined to blame them for that, poor dears.

LADY KITTY. Then we settled in Florence. And because we couldn't get the society we'd been used to we became used to the society we could get. Loose women and vicious men. Snobs who liked to patronise people with a handle to their names. Vague Italian Princes who were glad to borrow a few francs from Hughie and seedy countesses who liked to drive with me in the Cascine. And then Hughie began to hanker after his old life. He wanted to go big game shooting, but I dared not let him go. I was afraid he'd never come back.

ELIZABETH. But you knew he loved you.

LADY KITTY. Oh, my dear, what a blessed institution marriage is—for women, and what fools they are to meddle with it! The Church is so wise to take its stand on the indi—indi—

ELIZABETH. Solu—

LADY KITTY. Bility of marriage. Believe me, it's no joke when you have to rely only on yourself to keep a man. I could never afford to grow old. My dear, I'll tell you a secret that I've never told a living soul.

ELIZABETH. What is that?

LADY KITTY. My hair is not naturally this colour.

ELIZABETH. Really.

LADY KITTY. I touch it up. You would never have guessed, would you?

ELIZABETH. Never.

LADY KITTY. Nobody does. My dear, it's white, prematurely of course, but white. I always think it's a symbol of my life. Are you interested in symbolism? I think it's too wonderful.

ELIZABETH. I don't think I know very much about it.

LADY KITTY. However tired I've been I've had to be brilliant and gay. I've never let Hughie see the aching heart behind my smiling eyes.

ELIZABETH. [*Amused and touched.*] You poor dear.

LADY KITTY. And when I saw he was attracted by some one else the fear and the jealousy that seized me! You see, I didn't dare make a scene as I should have done if I'd been married—I had to pretend not to notice.

ELIZABETH. [*Taken aback.*] But do you mean to say he fell in love with anyone else?

LADY KITTY. Of course he did eventually.

ELIZABETH. [*Hardly knowing what to say.*] You must have been very unhappy.

LADY KITTY. Oh, I was, dreadfully. Night after night I sobbed my heart out when Hughie told me he was going to play cards at the club and I knew he was with that odious woman. Of course, it wasn't as if there weren't plenty of men who were only too anxious to console me. Men have always been attracted by me, you know.

ELIZABETH. Oh, of course, I can quite understand it.

LADY KITTY. But I had my self-respect to think of. I felt that whatever Hughie did I would do nothing that I should regret.

ELIZABETH. You must be very glad now.

LADY KITTY. Oh, yes. Notwithstanding all my temptations I've been absolutely faithful to Hughie in spirit.

ELIZABETH. I don't think I quite understand what you mean.

LADY KITTY. Well, there was a poor Italian boy, young Count Castel Giovanni, who was so desperately in love with me that his mother begged me not to be too cruel. She was afraid he'd go into a consumption. What could I do? And then, oh, years later, there was Antonio Melita. He said he'd shoot himself unless I—well, you understand I couldn't let the poor boy shoot himself.

ELIZABETH. D'you think he really would have shot himself?

LADY KITTY. Oh, one never knows, you know. Those Italians are so passionate. He was really rather a lamb. He had such beautiful eyes.

[ELIZABETH *looks at her for a long time and a cer-*

*tain horror seizes her of this dissolute, painted old woman.*

ELIZABETH. [*Hoarsely.*] Oh, but I think that's—dreadful.

LADY KITTY. Are you shocked? One sacrifices one's life for love and then one finds that love doesn't last. The tragedy of love isn't death or separation. One gets over them. The tragedy of love is indifference.

[ARNOLD *comes in.*

ARNOLD. Can I have a little talk with you, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH. Of course.

ARNOLD. Shall we go for a stroll in the garden?

ELIZABETH. If you like.

LADY KITTY. No, stay here. I'm going out anyway.

[*Exit* LADY KITTY.

ARNOLD. I want you to listen to me for a few minutes, Elizabeth. I was so taken aback by what you told me just now that I lost my head. I was rather absurd and I beg your pardon. I said things I regret.

ELIZABETH. Oh, don't blame yourself. I'm sorry that I should have given you occasion to say them.

ARNOLD. I want to ask you if you've quite made up your mind to go.

ELIZABETH. Quite.

ARNOLD. Just now I seem to have said all that I didn't want to say and nothing that I did. I'm stupid and tongue-tied. I never told you how deeply I loved you.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold!

ARNOLD. Please let me speak now. It's so very difficult. If I seemed absorbed in politics and the house, and so on, to the exclusion of my interest in you, I'm dreadfully sorry. I suppose it was absurd of me to think you would take my great love for granted.

ELIZABETH. But, Arnold, I'm not reproaching you.

ARNOLD. I'm reproaching myself. I've been tactless and neglectful. But I do ask you to believe that it hasn't been because I didn't love you. Can you forgive me?

ELIZABETH. I don't think that there's anything to forgive.

ARNOLD. It wasn't till to-day when you talked of leaving me that I realised how desperately in love with you I was.

ELIZABETH. After three years?

ARNOLD. I'm so proud of you. I admire you so much. When I see you at a party, so fresh and lovely, and everybody wondering at you, I have a sort of little thrill because you're mine, and afterwards I shall take you home.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold, you're exaggerating.

ARNOLD. I can't imagine this house without you. Life seems on a sudden all empty and meaningless. Oh, Elizabeth, don't you love me at all?

ELIZABETH. It's much better to be honest. No.

ARNOLD. Doesn't my love mean anything to you?

ELIZABETH. I'm very grateful to you. I'm sorry to cause you pain. What would be the good of my staying with you when I should be wretched all the time?

ARNOLD. Do you love that man as much as all that? Does my unhappiness mean nothing to you?

ELIZABETH. Of course it does. It breaks my heart. You see, I never knew I meant so much to you. I'm so touched. And I'm so sorry, Arnold, really sorry. But I can't help myself.

ARNOLD. Poor child, it's cruel of me to torture you.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold, believe me, I have tried to make the best of it. I've tried to love you, but I can't. After all, one either loves or one doesn't. Trying is no help. And now I'm at the end of my tether. I can't help the consequences—I must do what my whole self yearns for.

ARNOLD. My poor child, I'm so afraid you'll be unhappy. I'm so afraid you'll regret.

ELIZABETH. You must leave me to my fate. I hope you'll forget me and all the unhappiness I've caused you.

ARNOLD. [*There is a pause.* ARNOLD *walks up and*

*down the room reflectively. He stops and faces her.*] If you love this man and want to go to him I'll do nothing to prevent you. My only wish is to do what is best for you.

ELIZABETH. Arnold, that's awfully kind of you. If I'm treating you badly at least I want you to know that I'm grateful for all your kindness to me.

ARNOLD. But there's one favour I should like you to do me. Will you?

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold, of course I'll do anything I can.

ARNOLD. Teddie hasn't very much money. You've been used to a certain amount of luxury, and I can't bear to think that you should do without anything you've had. It would kill me to think that you were suffering any hardship or privation.

ELIZABETH. Oh, but Teddie can earn enough for our needs. After all, we don't want much money.

ARNOLD. I'm afraid my mother's life hasn't been very easy, but it's obvious that the only thing that's made it possible is that Porteous was rich. I want you to let me make you an allowance of two thousand a year.

ELIZABETH. Oh, no, I couldn't think of it. It's absurd.

ARNOLD. I beg you to accept it. You don't know what a difference it will make.

ELIZABETH. It's awfully kind of you, Arnold. It humiliates me to speak about it. Nothing would induce me to take a penny from you.

ARNOLD. Well, you can't prevent me from opening an account at my bank in your name. The money shall be paid in every quarter whether you touch it or not, and if you happen to want it, it will be there waiting for you.

ELIZABETH. You overwhelm me, Arnold. There's only one thing I want you to do for me. I should be very grateful if you would divorce me as soon as you possibly can.

ARNOLD. No, I won't do that. But I'll give you cau to divorce me.

ELIZABETH. You!

ARNOLD. Yes. But of course you'll have to be very careful for a bit. I'll put it through as quickly as possible, but I'm afraid you can't hope to be free for over six months.

ELIZABETH. But, Arnold, your seat and your political career!

ARNOLD. Oh, well, my father gave up his seat under similar circumstances. He's got along very comfortably without politics.

ELIZABETH. But they're your whole life.

ARNOLD. After all one can't have it both ways. You can't serve God and Mammon. If you want to do the decent thing you have to be prepared to suffer for it.

ELIZABETH. But I don't want you to suffer for it.

ARNOLD. At first I rather hesitated at the scandal. But I daresay that was only weakness on my part. Under the circumstances I should have liked to keep out of the Divorce Court if I could.

ELIZABETH. Arnold, you're making me absolutely miserable.

ARNOLD. What you said before dinner was quite right. It's nothing for a man, but it makes so much difference to a woman. Naturally I must think of you first.

ELIZABETH. That's absurd. It's out of the question. Whatever there's to pay I must pay it.

ARNOLD. It's not very much I'm asking you, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I'm taking everything from you.

ARNOLD. It's the only condition I make. My mind is absolutely made up. I will never divorce you, but I will enable you to divorce me.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arnold, it's cruel to be so generous.

ARNOLD. It's not generous at all. It's the only way I have of showing you how deep and passionate and sincere my love is for you.

[*There is a silence. He holds out his hand.* Good-night. I have a great deal of work to do before I go to bed.

ELIZABETH. Good-night.

ARNOLD. Do you mind if I kiss you?

ELIZABETH. [*With agony.*] Oh, Arnold!

[*He gravely kisses her on the forehead and then goes out.* ELIZABETH *stands lost in thought. She is shattered.* LADY KITTY *and* PORTEOUS *come in.* LADY KITTY *wears a cloak.*

LADY KITTY. You're alone, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH. That note you asked me about, Lady Kitty, from Teddie . . .

LADY KITTY. Yes?

ELIZABETH. He wanted to have a talk with me before he went away. He's waiting for me in the summer house by the tennis court. Would Lord Porteous mind going down and asking him to come here?

PORTEOUS. Certainly. Certainly.

ELIZABETH. Forgive me for troubling you. But it's very important.

PORTEOUS. No trouble at all.

[*He goes out.*

LADY KITTY. Hughie and I will leave you alone.

ELIZABETH. But I don't want to be left alone. I want you to stay.

LADY KITTY. What are you going to say to him?

ELIZABETH. [*Desperately.*] Please don't ask me questions. I'm so frightfully unhappy.

LADY KITTY. My poor child!

ELIZABETH. Oh, isn't life rotten? Why can't one be happy without making other people unhappy?

LADY KITTY. I wish I knew how to help you. I'm simply devoted to you. [*She hunts about in her mind for something to do or say.*] Would you like my lip-stick?

ELIZABETH. [*Smiling through her tears.*] Thanks. I never use one.

LADY KITTY. Oh, but just try. It's such a comfort when you're in trouble.

[*Enter* PORTEOUS *and* TEDDIE.

PORTEOUS. I brought him. He said he'd be damned if he'd come.

LADY KITTY. When a lady sent for him? Are these the manners of the young men of to-day?

TEDDIE. When you've been solemnly kicked out of a house once I think it seems rather pushing to come back again as though nothing had happened.

ELIZABETH. Teddie, I want you to be serious.

TEDDIE. Darling, I had such a rotten dinner at that pub. If you ask me to be serious on the top of that I shall cry.

ELIZABETH. Don't be idiotic, Teddie. [*Her voice faltering.*] I'm so utterly wretched.

[*He looks at her for a moment gravely.*

TEDDIE. What is it?

ELIZABETH. I can't come away with you, Teddie.

TEDDIE. Why not?

ELIZABETH. [*Looking away in embarrassment.*] I don't love you enough.

TEDDIE. Fiddle!

ELIZABETH. [*With a flash of anger.*] Don't say "Fiddle" to me.

TEDDIE. I shall say exactly what I like to you.

ELIZABETH. I won't be bullied.

TEDDIE. Now look here, Elizabeth, you know perfectly well that I'm in love with you, and I know perfectly well that you're in love with me. So what are you talking nonsense for?

ELIZABETH. [*Her voice breaking.*] I can't say it if you're cross with me.

TEDDIE. [*Smiling very tenderly.*] I'm not cross with you, silly.

ELIZABETH. It's harder still when you're being rather an owl.

TEDDIE. [*With a chuckle.*] Am I mistaken in thinking you're not very easy to please?

ELIZABETH. Oh, it's monstrous. I was all wrought up

and ready to do anything, and now you've thoroughly put me out. I feel like a great big fat balloon that some one has put a long pin into. [*With a sudden look at him.*] Have you done it on purpose?

TEDDIE. Upon my soul I don't know what you're talking about.

ELIZABETH. I wonder if you're really much cleverer than I think you are.

TEDDIE. [*Taking her hands and making her sit down.*] Now tell me exactly what you want to say. By the way, do you want Lady Kitty and Lord Porteous to be here?

ELIZABETH. Yes.

LADY KITTY. Elizabeth asked us to stay.

TEDDIE. Oh, I don't mind, bless you. I only thought you might feel rather in the way.

LADY KITTY. [*Frigidly.*] A gentlewoman never feels in the way, Mr. Luton.

TEDDIE. Won't you call me Teddie? Everybody does, you know.

[LADY KITTY *tries to give him a withering look, but she finds it very difficult to prevent herself from smiling.* TEDDIE *strokes* ELIZABETH'S *hands. She draws them away.*

ELIZABETH. No, don't do that. Teddie, it wasn't true when I said I didn't love you. Of course I love you. But Arnold loves me, too. I didn't know how much.

TEDDIE. What has he been saying to you?

ELIZABETH. He's been very good to me, and so kind. I didn't know he could be so kind. He offered to let me divorce him.

TEDDIE. That's very decent of him.

ELIZABETH. But don't you see, it ties my hands. How can I accept such a sacrifice? I should never forgive myself if I profited by his generosity.

TEDDIE. If another man and I were devilish hungry and there was only one mutton chop between us, and he

said, "You eat it," I wouldn't waste a lot of time arguing. I'd wolf it before he changed his mind.

ELIZABETH. Don't talk like that. It maddens me. I'm trying to do the right thing.

TEDDIE. You're not in love with Arnold; you're in love with me. It's idiotic to sacrifice your life for a slushy sentiment.

ELIZABETH. After all, I did marry him.

TEDDIE. Well, you made a mistake. A marriage without love is no marriage at all.

ELIZABETH. *I* made the mistake. Why should he suffer for it? If anyone has to suffer it's only right that I should.

TEDDIE. What sort of a life do you think it would be with him? When two people are married it's very difficult for one of them to be unhappy without making the other unhappy too.

ELIZABETH. I can't take advantage of his generosity.

TEDDIE. I daresay he'll get a lot of satisfaction out of it.

ELIZABETH. You're being beastly, Teddie. He was simply wonderful. I never knew he had it in him. He was really noble.

TEDDIE. You are talking rot, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I wonder if you'd be capable of acting like that.

TEDDIE. Acting like what?

ELIZABETH. What would you do if I were married to you and came and told you I loved somebody else and wanted to leave you?

TEDDIE. You have very pretty blue eyes, Elizabeth. I'd black first one and then the other. And after that we'd see.

ELIZABETH. You damned brute!

TEDDIE. I've often thought I wasn't quite a gentleman. Had it ever struck you?

[*They look at one another for a while.*

ELIZABETH. You know, you are taking an unfair ad-

vantage of me. I feel as if I came to you quite unsuspectingly and when I wasn't looking you kicked me on the shins.

TEDDIE. Don't you think we'd get on rather well together?

PORTEOUS. Elizabeth's a fool if she don't stick to her husband. It's bad enough for the man, but for the woman —it's damnable. I hold no brief for Arnold. He plays bridge like a foot. Saving your presence, Kitty, I think he's a prig.

LADY KITTY. Poor dear, his father was at his age. I daresay he'll grow out of it.

PORTEOUS. But you stick to him, Elizabeth, stick to him. Man is a gregarious animal. We're members of a herd. If we break the herd's laws we suffer for it. And we suffer damnably.

LADY KITTY. Oh, Elizabeth, my dear child, don't go. It's not worth it. It's not worth it. I tell you that, and I've sacrificed everything to love.

[*A pause.*

ELIZABETH. I'm afraid.

TEDDIE. [*In a whisper.*] Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I can't face it. It's asking too much of me. Let's say good-bye to one another, Teddie. It's the only thing to do. And have pity on me. I'm giving up all my hope of happiness.

[*He goes up to her and looks into her eyes.*

TEDDIE. But I wasn't offering you happiness. I don't think my sort of love tends to happiness. I'm jealous. I'm not a very easy man to get on with. I'm often out of temper and irritable. I should be fed to the teeth with you sometimes, and so would you be with me. I daresay we'd fight like cat and dog, and sometimes we'd hate each other. Often you'd be wretched and bored stiff and lonely, and often you'd be frightfully homesick, and then you'd regret all you'd lost. Stupid women would be rude to you because we'd run away together. And some of them would

cut you. I don't offer you peace and quietness. I offer you unrest and anxiety. I don't offer you happiness. I offer you love.

ELIZABETH. [*Stretching out her arms.*] You hateful creature, I absolutely adore you!

[*He throws his arms round her and kisses her passionately on the lips.*

LADY KITTY. Of course the moment he said he'd give her a black eye I knew it was finished.

PORTEOUS. [*Good-humouredly.*] You are a fool, Kitty.

LADY KITTY. I know I am, but I can't help it.

TEDDIE. Let's make a bolt for it now.

ELIZABETH. Shall we?

TEDDIE. This minute.

PORTEOUS. You're damned fools, both of you, damned fools! If you like you can have my car.

TEDDIE. That's awfully kind of you. As a matter of fact I got it out of the garage. It's just along the drive.

PORTEOUS. [*Indignantly.*] How do you mean, you got it out of the garage?

TEDDIE. Well, I thought there'd be a lot of bother, and it seemed to me the best thing would be for Elizabeth and me not to stand upon the order of our going, you know. Do it now. An excellent motto for a business man.

PORTEOUS. Do you mean to say you were going to steal my car?

TEDDIE. Not exactly. I was only going to bolshevise it, so to speak.

PORTEOUS. I'm speechless. I'm absolutely speechless.

TEDDIE. Hang it all, I couldn't carry Elizabeth all the way to London. She's so damned plump.

ELIZABETH. You dirty dog!

PORTEOUS. [*Spluttering.*] Well, well, well! . . . [*Helplessly.*] I like him, Kitty, it's no good pretending I don't. I like him.

TEDDIE. The moon's shining, Elizabeth. We'll drive all through the night.

PORTEOUS. They'd better go to San Michele. I'll wire to have it got ready for them.

LADY KITTY. That's where we went when Hughie and I . . . [*Faltering.*] Oh, you dear things, how I envy you!

PORTEOUS. [*Mopping his eyes.*] Now don't cry, Kitty. Confound you, don't cry.

TEDDIE. Come, darling.

ELIZABETH. But I can't go like this.

TEDDIE. Nonsense! Lady Kitty will lend you her cloak. Won't you?

LADY KITTY. [*Taking it off.*] You're capable of tearing it off my back if I don't.

TEDDIE. [*Putting the cloak on* ELIZABETH.] And we'll buy you a tooth-brush in London in the morning.

LADY KITTY. She must write a note for Arnold. I'll put it on her pincushion.

TEDDIE. Pincushion be blowed! Come, darling. We'll drive through the dawn and through the sunrise.

ELIZABETH. [*Kissing* LADY KITTY *and* PORTEOUS.] Good-bye. Good-bye.

[TEDDIE *stretches out his hand and she takes it. Hand in hand they go out into the night.*

LADY KITTY. Oh, Hughie, how it all comes back to me! Will they suffer all we suffered? And have we suffered all in vain?

PORTEOUS. My dear, I don't know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are. No one can learn by the experience of another because no circumstances are quite the same. If we made rather a hash of things perhaps it was because we were rather trivial people. You can do anything in this world if you're prepared to take the consequences, and consequences depend on character.

[*Enter* CHAMPION-CHENEY, *rubbing his hands. He is as pleased as Punch.*

C.-C. Well, I think I've settled the hash of that young man.

LADY KITTY. Oh!

C.-C. You have to get up very early in the morning to get the better of your humble servant.

[*There is the sound of a car starting.*

LADY KITTY. What is that?

C.-C. It sounds like a car. I expect it's your chauffeur taking one of the maids for a joy-ride.

PORTEOUS. Whose hash are you talking about?

C.-C. Mr. Edward Luton's, my dear Hughie. I told Arnold exactly what to do and he's done it. What makes a prison? Why, bars and bolts. Remove them and a prisoner won't want to escape. Clever, I flatter myself.

PORTEOUS. You were always that, Clive, but at the moment you're obscure.

C.-C. I told Arnold to go to Elizabeth and tell her she could have her freedom. I told him to sacrifice himself all along the line. I know what women are. The moment every obstacle was removed to her marriage with Teddie Luton, half the allurement was gone.

LADY KITTY. Arnold did that?

C.-C. He followed my instructions to the letter. I've just seen him. She's shaken. I'm willing to bet five hundred pounds to a penny that she won't bolt. A downy old bird, eh? Downy's the word. Downy.

[*He begins to laugh. They laugh, too. Presently they are all three in fits of laughter.*

[THE CURTAIN FALLS]

THE END

# THE LETTER

## *Characters*

*Robert Crosbie*
*Howard Joyce*
*Geoffrey Hammond*
*John Withers*
*Ong Chi Seng*
*Chung Hi*
*Leslie*
*Mrs. Joyce*
*Mrs. Parker*
*A Sikh Sergeant of Police, A Chinese Woman, Chinese Boys and Malay Servants*

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The action takes place on a plantation in the Malay Peninsula and at Singapore.

# The Letter: Act One

## ACT ONE

SCENE: *The scene is the sitting-room of the Crosbies' bungalow. Along the whole back of the scene runs the verandah, which is approached by steps from the garden. The room is comfortably but quite simply furnished with rattan chairs, in which are cushions; there are tables with bowls of flowers on them and pieces of Malay silver. On the walls are water-colour pictures, and here and there an arrangement of krises and parangs; there are horns of sladang and a couple of tigers' heads. Rattan mats on the floor. On the cottage piano a piece of music stands open. The room is lit by one lamp and this stands by a little table on which is* LESLIE'S *pillow lace. Another lamp hangs in the centre of the verandah.*

*When the Curtain rises the sound of a shot is heard and a cry from* HAMMOND. *He is seen staggering towards the verandah.* LESLIE *fires again.*

*Hammond*

Oh, my God!

(*He falls in a heap on the ground.* LESLIE *follows him, firing, and then, standing over*

*him, fires two or three more shots in rapid succession into the prostrate body. There is a little click as she mechanically pulls the trigger. The six chambers are empty. She looks at the revolver and lets it drop from her hand; then her eyes fall on the body, they grow enormous, as though they would start out of her head, and a look of horror comes into her face. She gives a shudder as she looks at the dead man and then, her gaze still fixed on the dreadful sight, backs into the room. There is an excited jabbering from the garden and* LESLIE *gives a start as she hears it. It is immediately followed by the appearance of the* HEAD-BOY *and another, and then while they are speaking, two or three more appear. These are Chinese and wear white trousers and singlets, the others are Malays in sarongs. The* HEAD-BOY *is a small fat Chinaman of about forty.*)

*Head-Boy*

Missy! Missy! Whatchee matter? I hear gun fire. (*He catches sight of the body.*) Oh!

(*The Boy with him speaks to him excitedly in Chinese.*)

*Leslie*

Is he dead?

*Head-Boy*

Missy! Missy! Who kill him? (*He bends over and looks at the corpse.*) That Mr. Hammond.

*Leslie*

Is he dead?

(*The* HEAD-BOY *kneels down and feels the man's face. The others stand round and chatter among themselves.*)

*Head-Boy*

Yes, I think him dead.

*Leslie*

Oh, my God!

*Head-Boy*

(*Getting up.*) Missy, what for you do that?

*Leslie*

Do you know where the Assistant District Officer lives?

*Head-Boy*

Mr. Withers, Missy? Yes, I savvy. He live jolly long way from here.

*Leslie*

Fetch him.

*Head-Boy*

More better we wait till daylight, Missy.

*Leslie*

There's nothing to be frightened of. Hassan will drive you over in the car. Is Hassan there?

*Head-Boy*

Yes, Missy. (*He points to one of the Malays.*)

*Leslie*

Wake Mr. Withers and tell him to come here at once. Say there's been an accident and Mr. Hammond's dead.

*Head-Boy*

Yes, Missy.

*Leslie*

Go at once.

(*The* HEAD-BOY *turns to* HASSAN *the chauffeur and gives him instructions in Malay to get the car out.* HASSAN *goes down the verandah steps.*)

*Head-Boy*

I think more better we bring body in, Missy, and put him on bed in spare room.

*Leslie*

(*With a broken cry of anguish.*) No.

*Head-Boy*

No can leave him here, Missy.

*Leslie*

Don't touch it. When Mr. Withers comes he'll say what's to be done.

*Head-Boy*

All right, Missy. I tell Ah Sing to wait here maybe.

*Leslie*

If you like. . . . I want Mr. Crosbie sent for.

*Head-Boy*

Post office all closed up, Missy, no can telephone till to-mollow morning.

*Leslie*

What's the time?

*Head-Boy*

I think, maybe, twelve o'clock.

*Leslie*

You must wake the man up at the post office as you go through the village, and he must get on to Singapore somehow or other. Or try at the police station. Perhaps they can get on.

*Head-Boy*

All light, Missy. I try.

*Leslie*

Give the man two or three dollars. Whatever happens they must get on to him at once.

*Head-Boy*

If I catchee speak master, what thing I say, Missy?

*Leslie*

I'll write the message down for you.

*Head-Boy*

All light, Missy. You write.

*(She sits down at a table and takes a sheet of paper and tries to write.)*

*Leslie*

Oh, my hand! I can't hold the pencil. (*She beats with her fist on the table in anger with herself, and takes the pencil again. She writes a few words and then gets up, paper in hand.*) Here's the message. That's the telephone number. Master is spending the night at Mr. Joyce's house.

*Head-Boy*

I savvy. The lawyer.

*Leslie*

They must ring and ring till they get an answer. They can give the message in Malay if they like. Read it and see if you understand.

*Head-Boy*

Yes, Missy, I understand.

*Leslie*

(*Reading.*) Come at once. There's been a terrible accident. Hammond is dead.

*Head-Boy*

All light, Missy.

(*There is the sound of a car being started.*)

*Leslie*

There's the car. Be quick now.

*Head-Boy*

Yes, Missy.

(*He goes out by the verandah.*)

(LESLIE *stands for a moment looking down at the floor. One or two* MALAY WOMEN *come softly up the steps. They look at the corpse and in whispers talk excitedly to one another.* LESLIE *becomes conscious of their presence.*)

*Leslie*

What do you want? Go away. All of you.

(*They fade away silently and only* AH SING, *a Chinese boy, is left.* LESLIE *gives the body a long look, then she goes into a room at the side, her own bedroom, and you hear the*

*door locked.* AH SING *comes into the room, takes a cigarette out of a box on the table and lights it; he sits down on the armchair, with one leg crossed over the other, and blows the smoke into the air.*)

*The Curtain Falls*

(*There is an interval of one minute to mark the passing of three hours.*)

(*The scene is the same as before. When the Curtain rises,* JOHN WITHERS *is walking up and down the room. The body has been removed. The* HEAD-BOY *comes in.*)

*Head-Boy*

My believe I hear motor car on road.

(WITHERS *goes to the verandah and listens.*)

*Withers*

I don't. (*Irritably.*) I can't imagine why he's so long. (*There is the faint toot of a motor horn.*) Yes, by George! That's a car. Thank the Lord for that.

(JOHN WITHERS *is a young man, neatly dressed in a white duck suit. His topee is on a table. He goes to the door of* LESLIE'S *room and knocks.*)

*Withers*

Mrs. Crosbie. (*There is no answer and he knocks again.*) Mrs. Crosbie.

*Leslie*

Yes?

*Withers*

There's a car on the road. That must be your husband.

(*There is no reply to this. He listens for a moment and then with a gesture of impatience moves over to the verandah. The sound is heard of a motor arriving. It stops.*

Is that you, Crosbie?

*Crosbie*

Yes.

*Withers*

Thank God. I thought you were never coming.

(CROSBIE *comes up the verandah steps. He is a man of powerful build, forty years old, with a large, sun-burned face; he is dressed in khaki shorts, a shirt without a tie, a khaki coat and a broad-brimmed hat.*)

*Crosbie*

Where's Leslie?

*Withers*

She's in her room. She's locked herself in. She wouldn't see me till you came.

*Crosbie*

What's happened? (*He goes to the door of* LESLIE'S *room and knocks urgently.*) Leslie, Leslie!

(*There is a moment's pause.* JOYCE *comes up the steps. He is a thin, spare, clean-shaven man of about five and forty. He wears ducks and a topee. He holds out his hand to* WITHERS.)

*Joyce*

My name is Joyce. Are you the A.D.O.?

*Withers*

Yes. Withers.

*Joyce*

Crosbie was spending the night with us. I thought I'd better come along with him.

*Crosbie*

Leslie! It's me! Open the door!

*Withers*

(*To* JOYCE.) Oh, are you the lawyer?

*Joyce*

Yes. Joyce and Simpson.

*Withers*

I know.

(*The door of* LESLIE'S *room is unlocked and slowly opened. She comes out, and, closing it behind her, stands against it.*)

*Crosbie*

(*Stretching out his hands as though to take her in his arms.*) Leslie.

*Leslie*

(*Warding him off with a gesture.*) Oh, don't touch me.

*Crosbie*

What's happened? What's happened?

*Leslie*

Didn't they tell you over the telephone?

*Crosbie*

They said Hammond was killed.

*Leslie*

(*Looking towards the verandah.*) Is he there still?

*Withers*

No. I had the body taken away.

(*She looks at the three men with haggard eyes and then throws back her head.*)

*Leslie*

He tried to rape me and I shot him.

*Crosbie*

Leslie!

*Withers*

My God!

*Leslie*

Oh, Robert, I'm so glad you've come.

*Crosbie*

Darling! Darling!

(*She throws herself in his arms and he clasps her to his heart. Now at last she breaks down and sobs convulsively.*)

*Leslie*

Hold me tight. Don't let me go. I'm so frightened. Oh, Robert, Robert.

*Crosbie*

It'll be all right. There's nothing to be frightened about. Don't let yourself go to pieces.

*Leslie*

I've got you, haven't I? Oh, Robert, what shall I do? I'm so unhappy.

*Crosbie*

Sweetheart!

*Leslie*

Hold me close to you.

*Withers*

Do you think you could tell us exactly what happened?

*Leslie*

Now?

*Crosbie*

Come and sit down, dear heart. You're all in. (*He leads her to a chair and she sinks into it with exhaustion.*)

*Withers*

I'm afraid it sounds awfully brutal, but my duty is . . .

*Leslie*

Oh, I know, of course. I'll tell you everything I can. I'll try to pull myself together. (*To* CROSBIE.) Give me your hankie. (*She takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and dries her eyes.*)

*Crosbie*

Don't hurry yourself, darling. Take your time.

*Leslie*

(*Forcing a smile to her lips.*) It's so good to have you here.

*Crosbie*

It's lucky Howard came along.

*Leslie*

Oh, Mr. Joyce, how nice of you! (*She stretches out her hand.*) Fancy your coming all this way at this time of night!

*Joyce*

Oh, that's all right.

*Leslie*

How's Dorothy?

*Joyce*

Oh, she's very well, thank you.

*Leslie*

I feel so dreadfully faint.

*Crosbie*

Would you like a drop of whiskey?

*Leslie*

(*Closing her eyes.*) It's on the table.

(CROSBIE *goes and mixes her a small whiskey and seltzer. She is lying on a long chair with her eyes closed, her face pale and wan.*)

*Joyce*

(*In an undertone to* WITHERS.) How long have you been here?

*Withers*

Oh, an hour or more. I was fast asleep. My boy woke me up and said the Crosbies' head-boy was there and wanted to see me at once.

*Joyce*

Yes.

*Withers*

Of course I jumped up. He was on the verandah. He told me Hammond had been shot, and asked me to come at once.

*Joyce*

Did he tell you she'd shot him?

*Withers*

Yes. When I got here Mrs. Crosbie had locked herself in her room and refused to come out till her husband came.

*Joyce*

Was Hammond dead?

*Withers*

Oh, yes, he was just riddled with bullets.

*Joyce*

(*In a tone of faint surprise.*) Oh!

*Withers*

(*Taking it out of his pocket.*) Here's the revolver. All six chambers are empty.

(LESLIE *slowly opens her eyes and looks at the two men talking.* JOYCE *takes the revolver in his hands and looks at it.*)

*Joyce*

(*To* CROSBIE *as he comes across the room with the whiskey.*) Is this yours, Bob?

*Crosbie*

Yes. (*He goes up to* LESLIE *and supports her while she sips.*)

*Joyce*

Have you questioned the boys?

*Withers*

Yes, they know nothing. They were asleep in their own quarters. They were awakened by the firing, and when they came here they found Hammond lying on the floor.

*Joyce*

Where exactly?

*Withers*

(*Pointing.*) There. On the verandah under the lamp.

*Leslie*

Thank you. I shall feel better in a minute. I'm sorry to be so tiresome.

*Joyce*

Do you feel well enough to talk now?

*Leslie*

I think so.

*Crosbie*

You needn't be in such a devil of a hurry. She's in no condition to make a long statement now.

*Joyce*

It'll have to be made sooner or later.

*Leslie*

It's all right, Robert, really. I feel perfectly well now.

*Joyce*

I think we ought to be put in possession of the facts as soon as possible.

*Withers*

Take your time, Mrs. Crosbie. After all, we're all friends here.

*Leslie*

What do you want me to do? If you've got any questions to ask, I'll do my best to answer them.

*Joyce*

Perhaps it would be better if you told us the whole story in your own way. Do you think you can manage that?

*Leslie*

I'll try. (*She gets up from the long chair.*)

*Crosbie*

What do you want to do?

*Leslie*

I want to sit upright. (*She sits down and for a moment hesitates.*)

(CROSBIE *and* WITHERS *are standing up.* JOYCE *is seated opposite to her.*)

(*The eyes of all of them are on her face.*)

(*Addressing* WITHERS.) Robert was spending the night in Singapore, you know.

*Withers*

Yes, your boy told me that.

*Leslie*

I was going in with him, but I wasn't feeling very well and I thought I'd stay here. I never mind being alone. (*With a half smile at* CROSBIE.) A planter's wife gets used to that, you know.

*Crosbie*

That's true.

*Leslie*

I had dinner rather late, and then I started working on my lace. (*She points to the pillow on which a piece of lace half made is pinned with little pins.*)

*Crosbie*

My wife is rather a dab at lace-making.

*Withers*

Yes, I know. I've heard that.

*Leslie*

I don't know how long I'd been working. It fascinates me, you know, and I lose all sense of time. Suddenly I heard a footstep outside and some one came up the steps of the verandah and said: "Good evening. Can I come in?" I was startled, because I hadn't heard a car drive up.

*Withers*

Hammond left his car about a quarter of a mile down the road. It's parked under the trees. Your chauffeur noticed it as we were driving back.

*Joyce*

I wonder why Hammond left his car there.

*Withers*

Presumably he did not want any one to hear him drive up.

*Joyce*

Go on, Mrs. Crosbie.

*Leslie*

At first I couldn't see who it was. I work in spectacles, you know, and in the half-darkness of the verandah it was impossible for me to recognise anybody. "Who is it?" I said. "Geoff Hammond." "Oh, of course, come in and have a drink," I said. And I took off my spectacles. I got up and shook hands with him.

*Joyce*

Were you surprised to see him?

*Leslie*

I was rather. He hadn't been up to the house for ages, had he, Robert?

*Crosbie*

Three months at least, I should think.

*Leslie*

I told him Robert was away. He'd had to go to Singapore on business.

*Withers*

What did he say to that?

*Leslie*

He said: "Oh, I'm sorry. I felt rather lonely

to-night, so I thought I'd just come along and see how you were getting on." I asked him how he'd come, as I hadn't heard a car, and he said he'd left it on the road because he thought we might be in bed and asleep and he didn't want to wake us up.

*Joyce*

I see.

*Leslie*

As Robert was away there wasn't any whiskey in the room, but I thought the boys would be asleep, so I didn't call them; I just went and fetched it myself. Hammond mixed himself a drink and lit his pipe.

*Joyce*

Was he quite sober?

*Leslie*

I never thought about it. I suppose he had been drinking, but just then it didn't occur to me.

*Joyce*

What happened?

*Leslie*

Well, nothing very much; I put on my spectacles again and went on with my work. We chatted about one thing and another. He asked me if Robert had heard that a tiger had been seen on the road two

or three days ago. It had killed a couple of goats and the villagers were in a state about it. He said he thought he'd try to get it over the week-end.

*Crosbie*

Oh, yes, I know about that. Don't you remember I spoke to you about it at tiffin yesterday.

*Leslie*

Did you? I believe you did.

*Withers*

Fire away, Mrs. Crosbie.

*Leslie*

Well, we were just chatting. Then suddenly he said something rather silly.

*Joyce*

What?

*Leslie*

It's hardly worth repeating. He paid me a little compliment.

*Joyce*

I think perhaps you'd better tell us exactly what he said.

*Leslie*

He said: "I don't know how you can bear to disfigure yourself with those horrible spectacles.

You've got very pretty eyes indeed, you know, and it's too bad of you to hide them."

*Joyce*

Had he ever said anything of the sort to you before?

*Leslie*

No, never. I was a little taken aback, but I thought it best to take it quite lightly. "I make no pretensions to being a raving beauty, you know," I said. "But you are," he said. It sounds awfully silly to repeat things like this.

*Joyce*

Never mind. Please let us have his exact words.

*Leslie*

Well, he said: "It's too bad of you to try to make yourself look plain, but, thank God, you don't succeed." (*She gives the two strangers a faintly deprecating look.*) I shrugged my shoulders. I thought it rather impertinent of him to talk to me like that.

*Crosbie*

I don't wonder.

*Joyce*

Did you say anything?

*Leslie*

Yes, I said: "If you ask me point blank I'm bound to tell you that I don't care a row of pins what you think about me." I was trying to snub him, but he only laughed. "I'm going to tell you all the same," he said. "I think you're the prettiest thing I've seen for many a long year." "Sweet of you," I said, "but in that case I can only think you half-witted." He laughed again. He'd been sitting over there, and he got up and drew up a chair near the table I was working at. "You're not going to have the face to deny that you have the prettiest hands in the world," he said. That rather put my back up. In point of fact, my hands are not very good, and I'd just as soon people didn't talk about them. It's only an awful fool of a woman who wants to be flattered on her worst points.

*Crosbie*

Leslie darling. (*He takes one of her hands and kisses it.*)

*Leslie*

Oh, Robert, you silly old thing.

*Joyce*

Well, when Hammond was talking in that strain, did he just sit still with his arms crossed?

*Leslie*

Oh, no. He tried to take one of my hands. But I gave him a little tap. I wasn't particularly annoyed, I merely thought he was rather silly. I said to him: "Don't be an idiot. Sit down where you were before and talk sensibly, or else I shall send you home."

*Withers*

But, Mrs. Crosbie, I wonder you didn't kick him out there and then.

*Leslie*

I didn't want to make a fuss. You know, there are men who think it's their duty to flirt with a woman when they get the chance. I believe they think women expect it of them, and for all I know a good many do. But I'm not one of them, am I, Robert?

*Crosbie*

Far from it.

*Leslie*

A woman only makes a perfect fool of herself if she makes a scene every time a man pays her one or two compliments. She doesn't need much experience of the world to discover that it means rather less than nothing. I didn't suspect for an instant that Hammond was serious.

*Joyce*

When did you suspect?

*Leslie*

Then. What he said next. You see, he didn't move. He just looked at me straight in the face, and said: "Don't you know that I'm awfully in love with you?"

*Crosbie*

The cad.

*Leslie*

"I don't," I answered. You see, it meant so little to me that I hadn't the smallest difficulty in keeping perfectly cool. "I don't believe it for a minute," I said, "and even if it were true I don't want you to say it."

*Joyce*

Were you surprised?

*Leslie*

Of course I was surprised. Why, we've known him for seven years, Robert.

*Crosbie*

Yes, he came here after the war.

*Leslie*

And he's never paid me the smallest attention.

I didn't suppose he even knew what colour my eyes were. If you'd asked me, I should have said I didn't begin to exist for him.

*Crosbie*

(*To* Joyce.) You must remember that we never saw very much of him.

*Leslie*

When he first came here he was ill and I got Robert to go over and fetch him; he was all alone in his bungalow.

*Joyce*

Where was his bungalow?

*Crosbie*

About six or seven miles from here.

*Leslie*

I couldn't bear the idea of his lying there without any one to look after him, so we brought him here and took care of him till he was fit again. We saw a certain amount of him after that, but we had nothing much in common, and we never became very intimate.

*Crosbie*

For the last two or three years we've hardly seen him at all. To tell you the truth, after all that

Leslie had done for him when he was ill I thought he was almost too casual.

*Leslie*

He used to come over now and then to play tennis, and we used to meet him at other people's houses now and again. But I don't think I'd set eyes on him for a month.

*Joyce*

I see.

*Leslie*

He helped himself to another whiskey and soda. I began to wonder if he'd been drinking. Anyhow, I thought he'd had enough. "I wouldn't drink any more if I were you," I said. I was quite friendly about it. I wasn't the least frightened or anything like that. It never occurred to me that I couldn't manage him. He didn't pay any attention to what I said. He emptied his glass and put it down. "Do you think I'm talking to you like this because I'm drunk?" he asked in a funny abrupt way. "That's the most obvious explanation, isn't it?" I said. It's awful having to tell you all this. I'm so ashamed. It's so disgraceful.

*Joyce*

I know it's hard. But for your own sake I beg you to tell us the whole story now.

*Withers*

If Mrs. Crosbie would like to wait a little, I don't see any great harm in that.

*Leslie*

No, if I've got to tell it I'll tell it now. What's the good of waiting? My head's simply throbbing.

*Crosbie*

Don't be too hard on her, Howard.

*Leslie*

He's being as kind as he can be.

*Joyce*

I hope so. "That's the most obvious explanation," you said.

*Leslie*

"Well, it's a lie," he said. "I've loved you ever since I first knew you. I've held my tongue as long as I could, and now it's got to come out. I love you. I love you. I love you." He repeated it just like that.

*Crosbie*

(*Between his teeth.*) The swine.

*Leslie*

(*Rising from her seat and standing.*) I got up and I put away the pillow with my lace. I held out

my hand. "Good-night," I said. He didn't take it. He just stood and looked at me and his eyes were all funny. "I'm not going now," he said. Then I began to lose my temper. I think I'd kept it too long. I think I'm a very even-tempered woman, but when I'm roused I don't care very much what I say. "But, you poor fool," I cried at him, "don't you know that I've never loved any one but Robert, and even if I didn't love Robert you're the last man I should care for." "What do I care?" he said. "Robert's away."

*Crosbie*

The cur! The filthy cur! Oh, by God . . .

*Joyce*

Be quiet, Bob.

*Leslie*

That was the last straw. I was beside myself. Even then I wasn't frightened. It never occurred to me he'd dare—he'd dare . . . I was just angry. I thought he was just a filthy swine to talk to me like that because he knew Robert was safely out of the way. "If you don't go away this minute," I said, "I shall call the boys and have you thrown out." He gave a filthy look. "They're out of earshot," he said. I walked past him quickly. I wanted to get out on to the verandah, so that I

could give the boys a call. I knew they'd hear me from there. But he took hold of my arm and swung me back. "Let me go," I screamed. I was furious. "Not much," he said. "Not much. I've got you now." I opened my mouth and I shouted as loud as I could: "Boy! boy!" But he put his hand over it. . . . Oh, it's horrible. I can't go on. It's asking too much of me. It's so shameful, shameful.

*Crosbie*

Oh, Leslie, my darling. I wish to God I'd never left you.

*Leslie*

Oh, it was awful. (*She sobs broken-heartedly.*)

*Joyce*

I beseech you to control yourself. You've been wonderful up till now. I know it's very hard, but you must tell us everything.

*Leslie*

I didn't know what he was doing. He flung his arms round me. He began to kiss me. I struggled. His lips were burning, and I turned my mouth away. "No, no, no!" I screamed. "Leave me alone. I won't!" I began to cry. I tried to tear myself away from him. He seemed like a madman.

*Crosbie*

I can't bear much more of this.

*Joyce*

Be quiet, Bob.

*Leslie*

I don't know what happened. I was all confused. I was so frightened. He seemed to be talking, talking. He kept on saying that he loved me and wanted me. Oh, the misery! He held me so tight that I couldn't move. I never knew how strong he was. I felt as weak as a rat. It was awful to feel so helpless. I'm trying to tell you everything, but it's all in a blur. I felt myself growing weaker and weaker, and I thought I'd faint. His breath was hot on my face, and it made me feel desperately sick.

*Withers*

The brute.

*Leslie*

He kissed me. He kissed my neck. Oh, the horror! And he held me so tight that I felt I couldn't breathe. Then he lifted me right off my feet. I tried to kick him. He only held me tighter. Then I felt he was carrying me. He didn't say anything. I didn't look at him, but somehow I saw his face and it was as white as a sheet and his eyes were burning. He wasn't a man any more,

he was a savage; I felt my heart pounding against my ribs. . . . Don't look at me. I don't want any of you to look at me. It flashed across me that he was carrying me to the bedroom. Oh!

*Crosbie*

If he weren't dead I'd strangle him with my own hands.

*Leslie*

It all happened in a moment. He stumbled and fell. I don't know why. I don't know if he caught his foot in something or if it was just an accident. I fell with him. It gave me a chance. Somehow his hold on me loosened and I snatched myself away from him. It was all instinctive; it was the affair of a moment; I didn't know what I was doing. I jumped up and I ran round the sofa. He was a little slow at getting up.

*Withers*

He had a game leg.

*Crosbie*

Yes. He had his knee-cap smashed in the war.

*Leslie*

Then he made a dash at me. There was a revolver on the table and I snatched it. I didn't even know I'd fired. I heard a report. I saw him

stagger. He cried out. He said something. I don't know what it was. I was beside myself. I was in a frenzy. He lurched out of the room on to the verandah and I followed him. I don't remember anything. I heard the reports one after the other. I don't ask you to believe me, but I didn't even know I was pulling the trigger. I saw Hammond fall down. Suddenly I heard a funny little click and it flashed through my mind that I'd fired all the cartridges and the revolver was empty. It was only then that I knew what I'd done. It was as if scales dropped from my eyes, and all at once I caught sight of Hammond, and he was lying there in a heap.

*Crosbie*

(*Taking her in his arms.*) My poor child.

*Leslie*

Oh, Robert, what have I done?

*Crosbie*

You've done what any woman would have done in your place, only nine-tenths of them wouldn't have had the nerve.

*Joyce*

How did the revolver happen to be there?

*Crosbie*

I don't very often leave Leslie alone for the

night, but when I do I feel safer if she's got a weapon handy. I saw that all the barrels were loaded before I left, and thank God I did.

*Leslie*

That's all, Mr. Withers. You must forgive me if I wouldn't see you when you came. But I wanted my husband.

*Withers*

Of course. May I say that I think you behaved magnificently. I'm fearfully sorry we had to put you to the ordeal of telling us all this. But I think Mr. Joyce was right. It was much better that we should be in possession of all the facts immediately.

*Leslie*

Oh, I know.

*Withers*

It's quite obvious the man was drunk, and he only got what he deserved.

*Leslie*

And yet I'd give almost anything if I could bring him back to life. It's so awful to think that I killed him.

*Crosbie*

It was an easy death for him. By God, if ever I've wanted to torture any one . . .

*Leslie*

No, don't, Robert, don't. The man's dead.

*Joyce*

Could I see the body for a minute?

*Withers*

Yes, I'll take you to where it is.

*Leslie*

(*With a little shudder.*) You don't want me to come?

*Joyce*

No, of course not. You stay here with Bob. We shall only be a minute.

(JOYCE *and* WITHERS *go out.*)

*Leslie*

I'm so tired. I'm so desperately tired.

*Crosbie*

I know you are, darling. I'd do anything to help you, and there doesn't seem to be a thing I can do.

*Leslie*

You can love me.

*Crosbie*

I've always loved you with all my heart.

*Leslie*

Yes, but now.

*Crosbie*

If I could love you any more I would now.

*Leslie*

You don't blame me?

*Crosbie*

Blame you? I think you've been splendid. By God, you're a plucky little woman.

*Leslie*

(*Tenderly.*) This is going to give you an awful lot of anxiety, my dear.

*Crosbie*

Don't think about me. I don't matter. Only think about yourself.

*Leslie*

What will they do to me?

*Crosbie*

Do? I'd like to see any one talk of doing anything to you. Why, there isn't a man or a woman in the colony who won't be proud to know you.

*Leslie*

I so hate the idea of every one talking about me.

*Crosbie*

I know, darling.

*Leslie*

Whatever people say you'll never believe anything against me, will you?

*Crosbie*

Of course not. What should they say?

*Leslie*

How can I tell? People are so unkind. They might easily say that he would never have made advances to me if I hadn't led him on.

*Crosbie*

I think that's the last thing any one who's ever seen you would dream of saying.

*Leslie*

Do you love me very much, Robert?

*Crosbie*

I can never tell you how much.

*Leslie*

We have been happy together all these years, haven't we?

*Crosbie*

By George, yes! We've been married for ten

years and it hardly seems a day. Do you know that we've never even had a quarrel?

*Leslie*

(*With a smile.*) Who could quarrel with any one as kind and as good-natured as you are?

*Crosbie*

You know, Leslie, it makes me feel stupid and awkward to say some things. I'm not one of those fellows with the gift of the gab. But I do want you to know how awfully grateful I am to you for all you've done for me.

*Leslie*

Oh, my dear, what are you talking about?

*Crosbie*

You see, I'm not in the least clever. And I'm a great ugly hulking devil. I'm not fit to clean your boots really. I never knew at the beginning why you ever thought of me. You've been the best wife a man ever had.

*Leslie*

Oh, what nonsense!

*Crosbie*

Oh, no, it isn't. Because I don't say much you

mustn't fancy I don't think a lot. I don't know how I've deserved all the luck I've had.

*Leslie*

Darling! It's so good to hear you say that.

(*He takes her in his arms and lingeringly kisses her mouth.* JOYCE *and* WITHERS *return. Without self-consciousness* LESLIE *releases herself from her husband's embrace and turns to the two men.*)

Wouldn't you like something to eat? You must be perfectly ravenous.

*Withers*

Oh, no, don't bother, Mrs. Crosbie.

*Leslie*

It's no bother at all. I expect the boys are about still, and if they're not I can easily make you a little something myself on the chafing-dish.

*Joyce*

Personally, I'm not at all hungry.

*Leslie*

Robert?

*Crosbie*

No, dear.

*Joyce*

In point of fact, I think it's about time we started for Singapore.

*Leslie*

(*A trifle startled.*) Now?

*Joyce*

It'll be dawn when we get there. By the time you've had a bath and some breakfast it'll be eight o'clock. We'll ring up the Attorney-General and find out when we can see him. Don't you think that's the best thing we can do, Withers?

*Withers*

Yes. I suppose so.

*Joyce*

You'll come with us, of course?

*Withers*

I think I'd better, don't you?

*Leslie*

Shall I be arrested?

*Joyce*

(*With a glance at* WITHERS.) I think you're by way of being under arrest now.

*Withers*

It's purely a matter of form, Mrs. Crosbie. Mr. Joyce's idea is that you should go to the Attorney-General and give yourself up. . . . Of course, all this is entirely out of my line. I don't exactly know what I ought to do.

*Leslie*

Poor Mr. Withers, I'm so sorry to give you all this trouble.

*Withers*

Oh, don't bother about me. The worst that can happen to me is that I shall get hauled over the coals for doing the wrong thing.

*Leslie*

(*With a faint smile.*) And you've lost a good night's rest, too.

*Joyce*

Well, we'll start when you're ready, my dear.

*Leslie*

Shall I be imprisoned?

*Joyce*

That is for the Attorney-General to decide. I hope that after you've told him your story we shall be able to get him to accept bail. It depends on what the charge is.

*Crosbie*

He's a very good fellow. I'm sure he'll do everything he can.

*Joyce*

He must do his duty.

*Crosbie*

What do you mean by that?

*Joyce*

I think it not unlikely that he'll say only one charge is possible, and in that case I'm afraid that an application for bail would be useless.

*Leslie*

What charge?

*Joyce*

Murder.

(*There is a moment's pause. The only sign that* LESLIE *gives that the word startles her is the clenching of one of her hands. But it requires quite an effort for her to keep her voice level and calm.*

*Leslie*

I'll just go and change into a jumper. I won't be a minute. And I'll get a hat.

*Joyce*

Oh, very well. You'd better go and give her a hand, Bob. She'll want some one to do her up.

*Leslie*

Oh, no, don't bother. I can manage quite well by myself. A jumper doesn't have to be done up, my poor friend.

*Joyce*

Doesn't it? I forgot. I think you'd better go along all the same. old man.

*Leslie*

I'm not thinking of committing suicide, you know.

*Joyce*

I should hope not. The idea never occurred to me. I thought I'd like to have a word or two with Withers.

*Leslie*

Come along, Robert.

(*They go into her bedroom, leaving the door open.* JOYCE *goes over and closes it.*)

*Withers*

By George! that woman's a marvel.

*Joyce*

(*Good-humouredly.*) In what way?

*Withers*

I never saw any one so calm in my life. Her self-control is absolutely amazing. She must have a nerve of iron.

*Joyce*

She has a great deal more character than I ever suspected.

*Withers*

You've known her a good many years, haven't you?

*Joyce*

Ever since she married Crosbie. He's my oldest pal in the colony. But I've never known her very well. She hardly ever came in to Singapore. I always found her very reserved, and I supposed she was shy. But my wife has been down here a good deal and she raves about her. She says that when you really get to know her she's a very nice woman.

*Withers*

Of course she s a very nice woman.

*Joyce*

(*With the faintest irony.*) She's certainly a very pretty one.

*Withers*

I was very much impressed by the way in which she told that terrible story.

*Joyce*

I wish she could have been a little more explicit here and there. It was rather confused towards the end.

*Withers*

My dear fellow, what do you expect? You could see that she was just holding on to herself like grim death. It seemed to me a marvel that she was so coherent. I say, what a swine that man was!

*Joyce*

By the way, did you know Hammond?

*Withers*

Yes, I knew him a little. I've only been here three months, you know.

*Joyce*

Is this your first job as A.D.O.?

*Withers*

Yes.

*Joyce*

Was Hammond a heavy drinker?

*Withers*

I don't know that he was. He could take his whack, but I never saw him actually drunk.

*Joyce*

Of course I've heard of him, but I never met him myself. He was by way of being rather a favourite with the ladies, wasn't he?

*Withers*

He was a very good-looking chap. You know the sort, very breezy and devil-may-care and generous with his money.

*Joyce*

Yes, that is the sort they fall for.

*Withers*

I've always understood he was one of the most popular men in the colony. Before he hurt his leg in the war he held the tennis championship, and I believe he had the reputation of being the best dancer between Penang and Singapore.

*Joyce*

Did you like him?

*Withers*

He was the sort of chap you couldn't help liking. I should have said he was a man who hadn't an enemy in the world.

*Joyce*

Was he the sort of chap you'd expect to do a thing like this?

*Withers*

How should I know? How can you tell what a man will do when he's drunk?

*Joyce*

My own opinion is that if a man's a blackguard when he's drunk he's a blackguard when he's sober.

*Withers*

What are you going to do, then?

*Joyce*

Well, it's quite evident that we must find out about him.

(LESLIE *comes in, followed by her husband. She carries a hat in her hand.*)

*Leslie*

Well, I haven't been long, have I?

*Joyce*

I shall hold you up as an example to my Dorothy.

*Leslie*

She's probably not half as slow as you are. I can always dress in a quarter of the time that Robert can.

*Crosbie*

I'll just go and start her up.

*Withers*

Is there room for me, or shall I come along in the other car?

*Leslie*

Oh, there'll be plenty of room.

(CROSBIE *and* WITHERS *go out.* LESLIE *is about to follow.*

*Joyce*

There's just one question I'd like to ask you.

*Leslie*

Yes, what is it?

*Joyce*

Just now, when I was looking at Hammond's body, it seemed to me that some of the shots must have been fired when he was actually lying on the ground. It gives me the impression that you must have stood over him and fired and fired.

*Leslie*

(*Putting her hand wearily on her forehead.*) I was trying to forget for a minute.

*Joyce*

Why did you do that?

*Leslie*

I didn't know I did.

*Joyce*

It's a question you must expect to be asked.

*Leslie*

I'm afraid you think I'm more cold-blooded than I am. I lost my head. After a certain time everything is all blurred and confused. I'm awfully sorry.

*Joyce*

Don't let it worry you, then. I daresay it's very natural. I'm sorry to make a nuisance of myself.

*Leslie*

Shall we go?

*Joyce*

Come on.

(*They go out.*)

(*The* HEAD-BOY *comes in and draws down the blinds that lead on to the verandah. He puts out the light and slips out. The room is in darkness.*

THE END OF ACT ONE

# The Letter: Act Two

## ACT TWO

SCENE: *The scene is the visitors' room in the gaol at Singapore. A bare room with whitewashed walls, on one of which hangs a large map of the Malay Peninsula; on another is a framed photograph of King George V. The window is barred. The only furniture consists of a table in polished pitch pine and half a dozen chairs. There are doors right and left. Through the window you see the green, luxuriant leaves of some tropical plants and the blue sky.*

*When the Curtain rises,* ROBERT CROSBIE *is seen standing at the window. He wears an air of profound dejection. He has on the clothes in which he is accustomed to walk over the estate, shorts and a khaki shirt; he holds his shabby old hat in his hand. He sighs deeply. The door on the left is opened and* JOYCE *comes in. He is followed by* ONG CHI SENG *with a wallet.* ONG CHI SENG *is a Cantonese, small but trimly built; he is very neatly dressed in white ducks, patent leather shoes and gay silk socks. He wears a gold wrist watch and invisible pince-nez. From his*

*breast pocket protrudes a rolled-gold fountain pen.*

*Crosbie*

Howard.

*Joyce*

I heard you were here.

*Crosbie*

I'm waiting to see Leslie.

*Joyce*

I've come to see her too.

*Crosbie*

Do you want me to clear out?

*Joyce*

No, of course not. You go along and see her when they send for you, and then she can come here.

*Crosbie*

I wish they'd let me see her here. It's awful having to see her in a cell with that damned matron always there.

*Joyce*

I thought you'd probably look in at the office this morning.

*Crosbie*

I couldn't get away. After all, the work on the

estate has got to go on, and if I'm not there to look after it everything goes to blazes. I came into Singapore the moment I could. Oh, how I hate that damned estate!

*Joyce*

In point of fact, I don't think it's been a bad thing for you during these last few weeks to have some work that you were obliged to do.

*Crosbie*

I daresay not. Sometimes I've thought I should go mad.

*Joyce*

You know you must pull yourself together, old man. You mustn't let yourself go to pieces.

*Crosbie*

Oh, I'm all right.

*Joyce*

You look as if you hadn't had a bath for a week.

*Crosbie*

Oh, I've had a bath all right. I know my kit's rather grubby, but it's all right for tramping over the estate. I came just as I was. I hadn't the heart to change.

*Joyce*

It's funny that you should have taken it all so

much harder than your missus. She hasn't turned a hair.

*Crosbie*

She's worth ten of me. I know that. I don't mind confessing it, I'm all in. I'm like a lost sheep without Leslie. It's the first time we've been separated for more than a day since we were married. I'm so lonely without her. (*He catches sight of* Ong Chi Seng.) Who's that?

*Joyce*

Oh, that's my confidential clerk, Ong Chi Seng. (Ong Chi Seng *gives a little bow and smiles with a flash of white teeth.*)

*Crosbie*

What's he come here for?

*Joyce*

I brought him with me in case I wanted him. Ong Chi Seng is as good a lawyer as I am. He took his degree in the University of Hong Kong, and as soon as he's learnt the ins and outs of my business he's going to set up in opposition.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Hi, hi.

*Joyce*

Perhaps you'd better wait outside, Ong. I'll call you if I want you.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Very good, sir. I shall be within earshot.

*Joyce*

It'll do if you're within call.

(ONG CHI SENG *goes out.*)

*Crosbie*

Oh, Howard, I wouldn't wish my worst enemy the agony that I've gone through during these horrible weeks.

*Joyce*

You look as if you hadn't had much sleep lately, old thing.

*Crosbie*

I haven't. I don't think I've closed my eyes the last three nights.

*Joyce*

Well, thank God it'll be over to-morrow. By the way, you'll clean yourself up a bit for the trial, won't you?

*Crosbie*

Oh, yes, rather. I'm staying with you to-night.

*Joyce*

Oh, are you? I'm glad. And you'll both come back to my house after the trial. Dorothy's determined to celebrate.

*Crosbie*

I think it's monstrous that they should have kept Leslie in this filthy prison.

*Joyce*

I think they had to do that.

*Crosbie*

Why couldn't they let her out on bail?

*Joyce*

It's a very serious charge, I'm afraid.

*Crosbie*

Oh, this red tape. She did what any decent woman would do in her place. Leslie's the best girl in the world. She wouldn't hurt a fly. Why, hang it all, man, I've been married to her for ten years; do you think I don't know her? God, if I'd got hold of that man I'd have wrung his neck, I'd have killed him without a moment's hesitation. So would you.

*Joyce*

My dear fellow, everybody's on your side.

*Crosbie*

Thank God nobody's got a good word to say for Hammond.

*Joyce*

I don't suppose a single member of the jury will go into the box without having already made up his mind to bring in a verdict of Not guilty.

*Crosbie*

Then the whole thing's a farce. She ought never to have been arrested in the first place; and then it's cruel, after all the poor girl's gone through, to subject her to the ordeal of a trial. There's not a soul I've met in Singapore, man or woman, who hasn't told me that Leslie was absolutely justified.

*Joyce*

The Law is the Law. She admits that she killed the man. It is terrible, and I'm dreadfully sorry both for you and for her.

*Crosbie*

I don't matter two straws.

*Joyce*

But the fact remains that murder has been committed, and in a civilised community a trial is inevitable.

*Crosbie*

Is it murder to exterminate noxious vermin? She shot him as she would have shot a mad dog.

*Joyce*

I should be wanting in my duty as your legal adviser if I didn't tell you that there is one point which causes me a little anxiety. If your wife had only shot Hammond once the whole thing would have been absolutely plain sailing. Unfortunately she fired six times.

*Crosbie*

Her explanation is perfectly simple. Under the circumstances any one would have done the same.

*Joyce*

I daresay, and, of course, I think the explanation is very reasonable.

*Crosbie*

Then what are you making a fuss about?

*Joyce*

It's no good closing our eyes to the facts. It's always a good plan to put yourself in another man's place, and I can't deny that if I were prosecuting for the Crown that is the point on which I would centre my enquiry.

*Crosbie*

Why?

*Joyce*

It suggests not so much panic as uncontrollable fury. Under the circumstances which your wife has described one would expect a woman to be frightened out of her wits, but hardly beside herself with rage.

*Crosbie*

Oh, isn't that rather far-fetched?

*Joyce*

I daresay. I just thought it was a point worth mentioning.

*Crosbie*

I should have thought the really important thing was Hammond's character, and, by Heaven! we've found out enough about him.

*Joyce*

We've found out that he was living with a Chinese woman, if that's what you mean.

*Crosbie*

Well, isn't that enough?

*Joyce*

I daresay it is. It was certainly an awful shock to his friends.

*Crosbie*

She'd been actually living in his bungalow for the last eight months.

*Joyce*

It's strange how angry that's made people. It's turned public opinion against him more than anything.

*Crosbie*

I can tell you this, if I'd known it I'd never have dreamed of letting him come to my place.

*Joyce*

I wonder how he managed to keep it so dark.

*Crosbie*

Will she be one of the witnesses?

*Joyce*

I shan't call her. I shall produce evidence that he was living with her, and, public feeling being what it is, I think the jury will accept that as proof that Hammond was a man of notorious character.

(A Sikh Sergeant of Police *comes into the room. He is tall, bearded, dark, and dressed in blue.*

*Sikh*

(*To* Crosbie.) You come now, Sahib.

*Crosbie*

At last.

*Joyce*

You haven't got very long to wait now. In another twenty-four hours she'll be a free woman. Why don't you take her somewhere for a trip? Even though we're almost dead certain to get an acquittal, a trial of this sort is anxious work, and you'll both of you want a rest.

*Crosbie*

I think I shall want it more than Leslie. She's been a brick. Why, d'you know, when I've been to see her it wasn't I who cheered her up, it was she who cheered me up. By God! there's a plucky little woman for you, Howard.

*Joyce*

I agree. Her self-control is amazing.

*Crosbie*

I won't keep her long. I know you're busy.

*Joyce*

Thanks.

(CROSBIE *goes out with the* SIKH POLICEMAN.)

Is my clerk outside, sergeant?

(*He has hardly spoken the words before* ONG CHI SENG *sidles in.*)

Give me those papers you've got there, will you?

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

(*He takes a bundle of papers from his wallet and gives them to* JOYCE. JOYCE *sits down with them at the table.*)

*Joyce*

That's all, Ong. If I want you I'll call.

*Ong Chi Seng*

May I trouble you for a few words private conversation, sir?

(ONG CHI SENG *expresses himself with elaborate accuracy; he has learnt English as a foreign language, and speaks it perfectly; but he has trouble with his R's, he always turns them into L's, and this gives his careful speech every now and then a faintly absurd air.*)

*Joyce*

(*With a slight smile.*) It's no trouble, Ong.

*Ong Chi Seng*

The matter upon which I desire to speak to you, sir, is delicate and confidential.

*Joyce*

Mrs. Crosbie will be here in five minutes. Don't

you think we might find a more suitable occasion for a heart-to-heart talk?

*Ong Chi Seng*

The matter on which I desired to speak with you, sir, has to do with the case of *R.* v. *Crosbie.*

*Joyce*

Oh?

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

*Joyce*

I have a great regard for your intelligence, Ong, I am sure I can trust you not to tell me anything that, as Mrs. Crosbie's counsel, it is improper that I should be advised of.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I think, sir, that you may rest assured of my discretion. I am a graduate of the University of Hong Kong, and I won the Chancellor's Prize for English composition.

*Joyce*

Fire away, then.

*Ong Chi Seng*

A circumstance has come to my knowledge, sir,

which seems to me to put a different complexion on this case.

*Joyce*

What circumstance?

*Ong Chi Seng*

It has come to my knowledge, sir, that there is a letter in existence from the defendant to the unfortunate victim of the tragedy.

*Joyce*

I should not be at all surprised. In the course of the last seven years I have no doubt that Mrs. Crosbie often had occasion to write to Mr. Hammond.

*Ong Chi Seng*

That is very probable, sir. Mrs. Crosbie must have communicated with the deceased frequently, to invite him to dine with her, for example, or to propose a tennis game. That was my first idea when the matter was brought to my notice. This letter, however, was written on the day of the late Mr. Hammond's death.

(*There is an instant's pause.* JOYCE, *a faint smile of amusement in his eyes, continues to look intently at* ONG CHI SENG.)

*Joyce*

Who told you this?

*Ong Chi Seng*

The circumstances were brought to my notice, sir, by a friend of mine.

*Joyce*

I have always known that your discretion was beyond praise, Ong Chi Seng.

*Ong Chi Seng*

You will no doubt recall, sir, that Mrs. Crosbie has stated that until the fatal night she had had no communication with the deceased for several weeks.

*Joyce*

Yes, I do.

*Ong Chi Seng*

This letter indicates in my opinion that her statement was not in every respect accurate.

*Joyce*

(*Stretching out his hand as though to take it.*) Have you got the letter?

*Ong Chi Seng*

No, sir.

*Joyce*

Oh! I suppose you know its contents.

*Ong Chi Seng*

My friend very kindly gave me a copy. Would you like to peruse it, sir?

*Joyce*

I should.

(Ong Chi Seng *takes from an inside pocket a bulky wallet. It is filled with papers, Singapore dollars and cigarette cards.*

*Joyce*

Ah, I see you collect cigarette cards.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir. I am happy to say that I have a collection which is almost unique and very comprehensive.

(*From the confusion he extracts a half-sheet of notepaper and places it before* Joyce.)

*Joyce*

(*Reading slowly, as though he could hardly believe his eyes.*) "Robert will be away for the night. I absolutely must see you. I shall expect you at eleven. I am desperate, and if you don't come I won't answer for the consequences. . . . Don't drive up. Leslie. . . ." What the devil does it mean?

*Ong Chi Seng*

That is for you to say, sir.

*Joyce*

What makes you think that this letter was written by Mrs. Crosbie?

*Ong Chi Seng*

I have every confidence in the veracity of my informant, sir.

*Joyce*

That's more than I have.

*Ong Chi Seng*

The matter can very easily be put to the proof. Mrs. Crosbie will no doubt be able to tell you at once whether she wrote such a letter or not.

(JOYCE *gets up and walks once or twice up and down the room. Then he stops and faces* ONG CHI SENG.)

*Joyce*

It is inconceivable that Mrs. Crosbie should have written such a letter.

*Ong Chi Seng*

If that is your opinion, sir, the matter is, of course, ended. My friend spoke to me on the subject only because he thought, as I was in your office,

you might like to know of the existence of this letter before a communication was made to the Public Prosecutor.

*Joyce*

Who has the original?

*Ong Chi Seng*

You will remember, sir, no doubt, that after the death of Mr. Hammond it was discovered that he had had relations with a Chinese woman. The letter is at present in her possession.

(*They face each other for a moment silently.*)

*Joyce*

I am obliged to you, Ong. I will give the matter my consideration.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Very good, sir. Do you wish me to make a communication to that effect to my friend?

*Joyce*

I daresay it would be as well if you kept in touch with him.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

(*He leaves the room.* JOYCE *reads through the letter once more with knitted brows; he hears a sound and realises that* LESLIE *is*

*coming. He places the copy of the letter among the papers on the table.* LESLIE *comes in with the* MATRON. *This is a stout middle-aged Englishwoman in a white dress.* LESLIE *is very simply and neatly dressed; her hair is done with her habitual care; she is cool and self-possessed.*)

*Joyce*

Good morning, Mrs. Crosbie.

(LESLIE *comes forward graciously. She holds out her hand as calmly as though she were receiving him in her drawing-room.*)

*Leslie*

How do you do? I wasn't expecting you so early.

*Joyce*

How are you to-day?

*Leslie*

I'm in the best of health, thank you. This is a wonderful place for a rest cure. And Mrs. Parker looks after me like a mother.

*Joyce*

How do you do, Mrs. Parker?

*Mrs. Parker*

Very well, thank you, sir. This I can't help saying, Mrs. Crosbie, no one could be less trouble than what you are. I shall be sorry to lose you, and that's a fact.

*Leslie*

(*With a gracious smile.*) You've been very kind to me, Mrs. Parker.

*Mrs. Parker*

Well, I've been company for you. When you're not used to it, it's lonely like in a place like this. It's a shame they ever put you here, if you want to know what I think about it.

*Joyce*

Well, Mrs. Parker, I daresay you won't mind leaving us. Mrs. Crosbie and I have got business to talk about.

*Mrs. Parker*

Very good, sir.

(*She goes out.*)

*Leslie*

Sometimes she drives me nearly mad, she's so chatty, poor dear. Isn't it strange how few people there are who can ever realise that you may be perfectly satisfied with your own company?

*Joyce*

You must have had plenty of that lately.

*Leslie*

I've read a great deal, you know, and I've worked at my lace.

*Joyce*

I need hardly ask if you've slept well.

*Leslie*

I've slept like a top. The time has really passed very quickly.

*Joyce*

It's evidently agreed with you. You're looking very much better and stronger than a few weeks ago.

*Leslie*

That's more than poor Robert is. He's a wreck, poor darling. I'm thankful for his sake that it'll all be over to-morrow. I think he's just about at the end of his tether.

*Joyce*

He's very much more anxious about you than you appear to be about yourself.

*Leslie*

Won't you sit down?

*Joyce*

Thank you.

(*They seat themselves.* JOYCE *at the table, with his papers in front of him.*)

*Leslie*

I'm not exactly looking forward to the trial, you know.

*Joyce*

One of the things that has impressed me is that each time you've told your story you've told it in exactly the same words. You've never varied a hair's breadth.

*Leslie*

(*Gently chaffing him.*) What does that suggest to your legal mind?

*Joyce*

Well, it suggests either that you have an extraordinary memory or that you're telling the plain, unvarnished truth.

*Leslie*

I'm afraid I have a very poor memory.

*Joyce*

I suppose I'm right in thinking that you had no communication with Hammond for several weeks before the catastrophe.

*Leslie*

(*With a friendly little smile.*) Oh, quite. I'm positive of that. The last time we met was at a tennis party at the McFarrens'. I don't think I said more than two words to him. They have two courts, you know, and we didn't happen to be in the same sets.

*Joyce*

And you hadn't written to him?

*Leslie*

Oh, no.

*Joyce*

Are you perfectly certain of that?

*Leslie*

Oh, perfectly. There was nothing I should write to him for except to ask him to dine or play tennis, and I hadn't done either for months.

*Joyce*

At one time you'd been on fairly intimate terms with him. How did it happen that you had stopped asking him to anything?

*Leslie*

(*With a little shrug of the shoulders.*) One gets tired of people. We hadn't anything very much in common. Of course, when he was ill Robert and

I did everything we could for him, but the last year or two he's been quite well. And he was very popular. He had a good many calls on his time and there didn't seem to be any need to shower invitations upon him.

*Joyce*

Are you quite certain that was all?

(LESLIE *hesitates for a moment and reflectively looks down.*)

*Leslie*

Well, of course, I knew about the Chinese woman. I'd actually seen her.

*Joyce*

Oh! You never mentioned that.

*Leslie*

It wasn't a very pleasant thing to talk about. And I knew you'd find out for yourselves soon enough. Under the circumstances I didn't think it would be very nice of me to be the first to tell you about his private life.

*Joyce*

What was she like?

(LESLIE *gives a slight start and a hard look suddenly crosses her face.*)

*Leslie*

Oh, horrible. Stout and painted and powdered. Covered with gold chains and bangles and pins. Not even young. She's older than I am.

*Joyce*

And it was after you knew about her that you ceased having anything to do with Hammond?

*Leslie*

Yes.

*Joyce*

But you said nothing about it to your husband.

*Leslie*

It wasn't the sort of thing I cared to talk to Robert about.

(JOYCE *watches her for a moment. Any suggestion of emotion that showed itself on her face when she spoke of the Chinese woman has left it and she is now once more cool and self-possessed.*)

*Joyce*

I think I should tell you that there is in existence a letter in your handwriting from you to Geoff Hammond.

*Leslie*

In the past I've often sent him little notes to ask

him to something or other or to get me something when I knew he was going into Singapore.

*Joyce*

This letter asks him to come and see you because Robert was going to Singapore.

*Leslie*

(*Smiling.*) That's impossible. I never did anything of the kind.

*Joyce*

You'd better read it for yourself.

(*He takes it from among the papers in front of him and hands it to her. She gives it a moment's glance and hands it back.*

*Leslie*

That's not my handwriting.

*Joyce*

I know. It's said to be an exact copy of the original.

(*She takes the letter again and now reads the words. And as she reads a horrible change comes over her. Her colourless face grows dreadful to look at. The flesh seems on a sudden to fall away and her skin is tightly stretched over the bones. She stares at*

JOYCE *with eyes that start from their sockets.*)

*Leslie*

(*In a whisper.*) What does it mean?

*Joyce*

That is for you to say.

*Leslie*

I didn't write it. I swear I didn't write it.

*Joyce*

Be very careful what you say. If the original is in your handwriting, it would be useless to deny it.

*Leslie*

It would be forgery.

*Joyce*

It would be difficult to prove that. It would be easy to prove that it was genuine.

(*A shiver passes through her body. She takes out a handkerchief and wipes the palms of her hands. She looks at the letter again.*)

*Leslie*

It's not dated. If I had written it and forgotten all about it, it might have been written years ago. If you'll give me time I'll try to remember the circumstances.

*Joyce*

I noticed there was no date. If this letter were in the hands of the prosecution they would cross-examine your house-boys. They would soon find out whether some one took a letter to Hammond on the day of his death.

(*She clasps her hands violently and sways on her chair so that you might think she would faint.*)

*Leslie*

I swear to you that I did not write that letter.

*Joyce*

In that case we need not go into the matter further. If the person who possesses this letter sees fit to place it in the hands of the prosecution you will be prepared.

(*There is a long pause.* JOYCE *waits for* LESLIE *to speak, but she stares straight in front of her.*

If you have nothing more to say to me, I think I'll be getting back to my office.

*Leslie*

(*Still not looking at him.*) What would any one who read the letter be inclined to think that it meant?

*Joyce*

He'd know that you had told a deliberate lie.

*Leslie*

When?

*Joyce*

When you stated definitely that you had had no communication with Hammond for at least six weeks.

*Leslie*

The whole thing has been a terrible shock to me. The events of that horrible night have been a nightmare. It's not very strange if one detail has escaped my memory.

*Joyce*

Your memory has reproduced very exactly every particular of your interview with Hammond. It is very strange that you should have forgotten so important a point as that he came to the bungalow on the night of his death at your express desire.

*Leslie*

I hadn't forgotten.

*Joyce*

Then why didn't you mention it?

*Leslie*

I was afraid to. I thought you'd none of you believe my story if I admitted that he'd come at my

invitation. I daresay it was very stupid of me. I lost my head, and after I'd once said that I'd had no communication with Hammond I was obliged to stick to it.

*Joyce*

You will be required to explain then why you asked Hammond to come to you when Robert was away for the night.

*Leslie*

(*With a break in her voice.*) It was a surprise I was preparing for Robert's birthday. I knew he wanted a new gun, and, you know, I'm dreadfully stupid about sporting things. I wanted to talk to Geoff about it. I thought I'd get him to order it for me.

*Joyce*

Perhaps the terms of the letter are not very clear to your recollection. Will you have another look at it.

*Leslie*

(*Quickly drawing back.*) No, I don't want to.

*Joyce*

Then I must read it to you. *Robert will be away for the night. I absolutely must see you. I shall expect you at eleven. I am desperate, and if you don't come I won't answer for the consequences.*

*Don't drive up.—Leslie.* Does it seem to you the sort of letter a woman would write to a rather distant acquaintance because she wanted to consult him about buying a gun?

*Leslie*

I daresay it's rather extravagant and emotional. I do express myself like that, you know. I'm quite prepared to admit it's rather silly.

*Joyce*

I must have been very much mistaken. I always thought you a very reserved and self-possessed woman.

*Leslie*

And after all, Geoff Hammond wasn't quite a distant acquaintance. When he was ill I nursed him like a mother.

*Joyce*

By the way, did you call him Geoff?

*Leslie*

Everybody did. He wasn't the kind of man any one would think of calling Mr. Hammond.

*Joyce*

Why did you ask him to come at so late an hour?

*Leslie*

(*Recovering her self-possession.*) Is eleven very

late? He was always dining somewhere or other. I thought he'd look in on his way home.

*Joyce*

And why did you ask him not to drive up?

*Leslie*

(*With a shrug of the shoulder.*) You know how Chinese boys gossip. If they'd heard him come, the last thing they'd have ever thought was that he was there for a perfectly innocent purpose.

(JOYCE *gets up and walks once or twice up and down the room. Then, leaning over the back of his chair, he speaks in a tone of deep gravity.*)

*Joyce*

Mrs. Crosbie, I want to talk to you very, very seriously. This case was comparatively plain sailing. There was only one point that seemed to me to require explanation. So far as I could judge, you had fired no less than four shots into Hammond when he was lying on the ground. It was hard to accept the possibility that a delicate, frightened woman, of gentle nurture and refined instincts, should have surrendered to an absolutely uncontrollable frenzy. But, of course, it was admissible. Although Geoffrey Hammond was much liked, and on the whole thought highly of, I was prepared to

prove that he was the sort of man who might be guilty of the crime which in justification of your act you accused him of. The fact, which was discovered after his death, that he had been living with a Chinese woman gave us something very definite to go upon. That robbed him of any sympathy that might have been felt for him. We made up our minds to make every use of the odium that such a connection cast upon him in the minds of all respectable people. I told your husband just now that I was certain of an acquittal, and I wasn't just telling him that to cheer him up. I do not believe the jury would have left the box.

(*They look into each other's eyes.* LESLIE *is strangely still. She is like a bird paralysed by the fascination of a snake.*)

But this letter has thrown an entirely different complexion on the case. I am your legal adviser. I shall represent you in court. I take your story as you tell it to me, and I shall conduct your defence according to its terms. It may be that I believe your statements, or it may be that I doubt them. The duty of counsel is to persuade the jury that the evidence placed before them is not such as to justify them in bringing in a verdict of guilty, and any private opinion he may have of the innocence or guilt of his client is entirely beside the point.

*Leslie*

I don't know what you're driving at.

*Joyce*

You're not going to deny that Hammond came to your house at your urgent and, I may even say, hysterical invitation?

(LESLIE *does not answer for a moment. She seems to consider.*)

*Leslie*

They can prove that the letter was taken to his bungalow by one of the house-boys. He rode over on his bicycle.

*Joyce*

You mustn't expect other people to be stupider than you. The letter will put them on the track of suspicions that have entered nobody's head. I will not tell you what I personally thought when I read it. I do not wish you to tell me anything but what is needed to save your neck.

(LESLIE *crumples up suddenly. She falls to the floor in a dead faint before* JOYCE *can catch her. He looks round the room for water, but can find none. He glances at the door, but will not call for help. He does not wish to be disturbed. He kneels down be-*

*side her, waiting for her to recover, and at last she opens her eyes.)*

*Joyce*

Keep quite still. You'll be better in a minute.

*Leslie*

Don't let any one come.

*Joyce*

No. No.

*Leslie*

Mr. Joyce, you won't let them hang me.

(*She begins to cry hysterically: he tries in undertones to calm her.*)

*Joyce*

Sh! Sh! Don't make a noise. Sh! Sh! It's all right. Don't, don't, don't! For goodness' sake pull yourself together.

*Leslie*

Give me a minute.

(*You see the effort she makes to regain her self-control and soon she is once more calm.*)

*Joyce*

(*With almost unwilling admiration.*) You've got pluck. I think no one could deny that.

*Leslie*

Let me get up now. It was silly of me to faint.

(*He gives her his hand and helps her to her feet. He leads her to a chair and she sinks down wearily.*)

*Joyce*

Do you feel a little better?

*Leslie*

(*With her eyes closed.*) Don't talk to me for a moment or two.

*Joyce*

Very well.

*Leslie*

(*At last, with a little sigh.*) I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of things.

*Joyce*

I'm sorry.

*Leslie*

For Robert, not for me. You distrusted me from the beginning.

*Joyce*

That's neither here nor there.

(*She gives him a glance and then looks down.*)

*Leslie*

Isn't it possible to get hold of the letter?

*Joyce*

(*With a frown to conceal his embarrassment.*) I don't think anything would have been said to me about it if the person in whose possession it is was not prepared to sell it.

*Leslie*

Who's got it?

*Joyce*

The Chinese woman who was living in Hammond's house.

(LESLIE *instinctively clenches her hands; but again controls herself.*)

*Leslie*

Does she want an awful lot for it?

*Joyce*

I imagine that she has a pretty shrewd idea of its value. I doubt if it would be possible to get hold of it except for a very large sum.

*Leslie*

(*Hoarsely.*) Are you going to let me be hanged.

*Joyce*

(*With some irritation.*) Do you think it's so simple as all that to secure possession of an unwelcome piece of evidence?

*Leslie*

You say the woman is prepared to sell it.

*Joyce*

But I don't know that I'm prepared to buy it.

*Leslie*

Why not?

*Joyce*

I don't think you know what you're asking me. Heaven knows, I don't wish to make phrases, but I've always thought I was by way of being an honest man. You're asking me to do something that is no different from suborning a witness.

*Leslie*

(*Her voice rising.*) Do you mean to say you can save me and you won't! What harm have I ever done you? You can't be so cruel.

*Joyce*

I'm sorry it sounds cruel. I want to do my best for you, Mrs. Crosbie. A lawyer has a duty not only to his client, but also to his profession.

*Leslie*

(*With dismay.*) Then what is going to happen to me?

*Joyce*

(*Very gravely.*) Justice must take its course.

(LESLIE *grows very pale. A little shudder passes through her body. When she answers her voice is low and quiet.*)

*Leslie*

I put myself in your hands. Of course, I have no right to ask you to do anything that isn't proper. I was asking more for Robert's sake than for mine. But if you knew everything, I believe you'd think I was deserving of your pity.

*Joyce*

Poor old Bob, it'll nearly kill him. He's utterly unprepared.

*Leslie*

If I'm hanged it certainly won't bring Geoff Hammond back to life again.

(*There is a moment's silence while* JOYCE *reflects upon the situation.*)

*Joyce*

(*Almost to himself.*) Sometimes I think that when we say our honour prevents us from doing this or that we deceive ourselves, and our real motive is vanity. I ask myself, what really is the explana-

tion of that letter? I daren't ask you. It's not fair to you to conclude from it that you killed Hammond without provocation. (*With emotion.*) It's absurd how fond I am of Bob. You see, I've known him so long. His life may very well be ruined, too.

*Leslie*

I know I have no right to ask you to do anything for me, but Robert is so kind and simple and good. I think he's never done any one any harm in his life. Can't you save him from this bitter pain and this disgrace?

*Joyce*

You mean everything in the world to him, don't you?

*Leslie*

I suppose so. I'm very grateful for the love he's given me.

*Joyce*

(*Making his resolution.*) I'm going to do what I can for you. (*She gives a little gasp of relief.*) But don't think I don't know I'm doing wrong. I am. I'm doing it with my eyes open.

*Leslie*

It can't be wrong to save a suffering woman. You're doing no harm to anybody else.

*Joyce*

You don't understand. It's only natural. Let's not discuss that. . . . Do you know anything about Bob's circumstances?

*Leslie*

He has a good many tin shares and a part interest in two or three rubber estates. I suppose he could raise money.

*Joyce*

He would have to be told what it was for.

*Leslie*

Will it be necessary to show him the letter?

*Joyce*

Don't you want him to see it?

*Leslie*

No.

*Joyce*

I shall do everything possible to prevent him from seeing it till after the trial. He will be an important witness. I think it very necessary that he should be as firmly convinced of your innocence as he is now.

*Leslie*

And afterwards?

*Joyce*

I'll still do my best for you.

*Leslie*

Not for my sake—for his. If he loses his trust in me he loses everything.

*Joyce*

It's strange that a man can live with a woman for ten years and not know the first thing about her. It's rather frightening.

*Leslie*

He knows that he loves me. Nothing else matters.

*Joyce*

(*Goes to the door and opens it.*) Mrs. Parker, I'm just going.

(Mrs. Parker *comes in again.*)

*Mrs. Parker*

Gracious, how white you look, Mrs. Crosbie. Mr. Joyce hasn't been upsetting you, has he? You look like a ghost.

*Leslie*

(*Graciously smiling, with an instinctive resumption of her social manner.*) No, he's been kindness itself. I daresay the strain is beginning to tell on me a little. (*She holds out her hand to* Joyce.) Good-bye. It's good of you to take all this trouble

for me. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am.

*Joyce*

I shan't see you again till just before the trial to-morrow.

*Leslie*

I've got a lot to do before then. I've been making Mrs. Parker a lace collar, and I want to get it done before I leave here.

*Mrs. Parker*

It's so grand, I shall never be able to bring myself to wear it. She makes beautiful lace, you'd be surprised.

*Joyce*

I know she does.

*Leslie*

I'm afraid it's my only accomplishment.

*Joyce*

Good morning, Mrs. Parker.

*Mrs. Parker*

Good morning, sir.

(*She goes out accompanied by* LESLIE.)

(JOYCE *gathers his papers together. There is a knock at the door.*)

*Joyce*

Come in.

(*The door is opened and* Ong Chi Seng *enters.*)

*Ong Chi Seng*

I desire to remind you, sir, that you have an appointment with Mr. Reed, of Reed and Pollock, at twelve-thirty.

*Joyce*

(*With a glance at his watch.*) He'll have to wait.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Very good, sir. (*He goes to the door and is about to go out, then, as though on an afterthought, he stops.*) Is there anything further you wish me to say to my friend, sir?

*Joyce*

What friend?

*Ong Chi Seng*

About the letter which Mrs. Crosbie wrote to Hammond, deceased, sir.

*Joyce*

(*Very casually.*) Oh, I'd forgotten about that. I mentioned it to Mrs. Crosbie and she denies having written anything of the sort. It's evidently a forgery.

(*He takes out the copy from the papers in front of him and hands it to* ONG CHI SENG. *The Chinaman ignores the gesture.*)

*Ong Chi Seng*

In that case, sir, I suppose there would be no objection if my friend delivered the letter to the Public Prosecutor.

*Joyce*

None. But I don't quite see what good that would do your friend.

*Ong Chi Seng*

My friend thought it was his duty, sir, in the interests of justice.

*Joyce*

(*Grimly.*) I am the last man in the world to interfere with any one who wishes to do his duty, Ong.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I quite understand, sir, but from my study of the case, *R.* v. *Crosbie,* I am of the opinion that the production of such a letter would be damaging to our client.

*Joyce*

I have always had a high opinion of your legal acumen, Ong Chi Seng.

*Ong Chi Seng*

It has occurred to me, sir, that if I could persuade my friend to induce the Chinese woman who has the letter to deliver it into our hands it would save a great deal of trouble.

*Joyce*

I suppose your friend is a business man. Under what circumstances do you think he would be induced to part with the letter?

*Ong Chi Seng*

He has not got the letter.

*Joyce*

Oh, has he got a friend, too?

*Ong Chi Seng*

The Chinese woman has got the letter. He is only a relation of the Chinese woman. She is an ignorant woman; she did not know the value of the letter till my friend told her.

*Joyce*

What value did he put on it?

*Ong Chi Seng*

Ten thousand dollars, sir.

*Joyce*

Good God! Where on earth do you suppose Mrs. Crosbie can get ten thousand dollars? I tell you the letter's a forgery.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Mr. Crosbie owns an eighth share of the Bekong Rubber Estate, and a sixth share of the Kelanton River Rubber Estate. I have a friend who will lend him the money on the security of his properties.

*Joyce*

You have a large circle of acquaintances, Ong.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

*Joyce*

Well, you can tell them all to go to hell. I would never advise Mr. Crosbie to give a penny more than five thousand for a letter that can be very easily explained.

*Ong Chi Seng*

The Chinese woman does not want to sell the letter, sir. My friend took a long time to persuade her. It is useless to offer her less than the sum mentioned.

*Joyce*

Ten thousand dollars is an awful lot.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Mr. Crosbie will certainly pay it rather than see his wife hanged by the neck, sir.

*Joyce*

Why did vour friend fix upon that particular amount?

*Ong Chi Seng*

I will not attempt to conceal anything from you, sir. Upon making enquiry, sir, my friend came to the conclusion that ten thousand dollars was the largest sum Mr. Crosbie could possibly get.

*Joyce*

Ah, that is precisely what occurred to me. Well, I will speak to Mr. Crosbie.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Mr. Crosbie is still here, sir.

*Joyce*

Oh! What's he doing?

*Ong Chi Seng*

We have only a very short time, sir, and the matter, in my opinion, brooks of no delay.

*Joyce*

In that case be brief, Ong.

*Ong Chi Seng*

It occurred to me that you would wish to speak to Mr. Crosbie and, therefore, I took the liberty of asking him to wait. If it would be convenient for you to speak to him now, sir, I could impart your decision to my friend when I have my tiffin.

*Joyce*

Where is the Chinese woman now?

*Ong Chi Seng*

She is staying in the house of my friend, sir.

*Joyce*

Will she come to my office?

*Ong Chi Seng*

I think it more better you go to her, sir. I can take you to the house to-night, and she will give you the letter. She is a very ignorant woman and she does not understand cheques.

*Joyce*

I wasn't thinking of giving her a cheque. I should bring banknotes with me.

*Ong Chi Seng*

It would only be waste of time to bring less than ten thousand dollars, sir.

*Joyce*

I quite understand.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Shall I tell Mr. Crosbie that you wish to see him, sir?

*Joyce*

Ong Chi Seng.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

*Joyce*

Is there anything else you know?

*Ong Chi Seng*

No, sir. I am of the opinion that a confidential clerk should have no secrets from his employer. May I ask why you make this enquiry, sir?

*Joyce*

Call Mr. Crosbie.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Very good, sir.

(*He goes out, and in a moment opens the door once more for* Crosbie.)

*Joyce*

It's good of you to have waited, old man.

*Crosbie*

Your clerk said that you particularly wished me to.

*Joyce*

(*As casually as he can.*) A rather unpleasant thing has happened, Bob. It appears that your wife sent a letter to Hammond asking him to come to the bungalow on the night he was killed.

*Crosbie*

But that's impossible. She's always stated that she had had no communication with Hammond. I know from my own knowledge that she hadn't set eyes upon him for a couple of months.

*Joyce*

The fact remains that the letter exists. It's in the possession of the Chinese woman Hammond was living with.

*Crosbie*

What did she write to him for?

*Joyce*

Your wife meant to give you a present on your birthday, and she wanted Hammond to help her to get it. Your birthday was just about then, wasn't it?

*Crosbie*

Yes. In point of fact it was a fortnight ago to-day.

*Joyce*

In the emotional excitement that she suffered from after the tragedy she forgot that she'd written a letter to him, and having once denied having any communication with Hammond she was afraid to say she'd made a mistake.

*Crosbie*

Why?

*Joyce*

My dear fellow. It was, of course, very unfortunate, but I daresay it was not unnatural.

*Crosbie*

That's unlike Leslie. I've never known her afraid of anything.

*Joyce*

The circumstances were exceptional.

*Crosbie*

Does it very much matter? If she's asked about it she can explain.

*Joyce*

It would be very awkward if this letter found its way into the hands of the prosecution. Your wife

has lied, and she would be asked some difficult questions.

*Crosbie*

Leslie would never tell a lie intentionally.

*Joyce*

(*With a shadow of impatience.*) My dear Bob, you *must* try to understand. Don't you see that it alters things a good deal if Hammond did not intrude, an unwanted guest, but came to your house by invitation? It would be easy to arouse in the jury a certain indecision of mind.

*Crosbie*

I may be very stupid, but I don't understand. You lawyers, you seem to take a delight in making mountains out of mole-heaps. After all, Howard, you're not only my lawyer, you're the oldest friend I have in the world.

*Joyce*

I know. That is why I'm taking a step the gravity of which I can never expect you to realise. I think we must get hold of that letter. I want you to authorise me to buy it.

*Crosbie*

I'll do whatever you think is right.

*Joyce*

I don't think it's right, but I think it's expedient. Juries are very stupid. I think it's just as well not to worry them with more evidence than they can conveniently deal with.

*Crosbie*

Well, I don't pretend to understand, but I'm perfectly prepared to leave myself in your hands. Go ahead and do as you think fit. I'll pay.

*Joyce*

All right. And now put the matter out of your mind.

*Crosbie*

That's easy. I could never bring myself to believe that Leslie had ever done anything that wasn't absolutely square and above board.

*Joyce*

Let's go to the club. I badly want a whiskey and soda.

THE END OF ACT TWO

# The Letter: Act Three

## ACT THREE

### Scene I

Scene: *The scene is a small room in the Chinese quarter of Singapore. The walls are white-washed, but dirty and bedraggled, on one of them hangs a cheap Chinese oleograph, stained and discoloured; on another, unframed and pinned up, a picture of a nude from one of the illustrated papers. The only furniture consists of a sandal-wood box and a low Chinese pallet bed, with a lacquered neck-rest. There is a closed window, which is at the back, and a door on the right. It is night and the room is lit by one electric light, a globe without a shade.*

*When the Curtain rises* Chung Hi *is lying on the pallet bed, with his opium pipe, his lamp, and the tray on which are the little tin of opium and a couple of long needles. He is reading a Chinese paper. He is a fat Chinaman in white trousers and a singlet. On his feet are Chinese slippers. A* Boy *dressed in the same way, is seated on the sandalwood chest idly playing a Chinese flute. He plays a strange Chinese tune.* Chung Hi *dips*

*his needle in the opium and heats it over the flame of the lamp, puts it in the pipe, inhales and presently blows out a thick cloud of smoke. There is a scratching at the door.* CHUNG HI *speaks a few words in Chinese and the* BOY *goes to it and just opens it. The* BOY *speaks to the person there and still from the door says something to* CHUNG HI. CHUNG HI *makes answer and gets up from the pallet bed, putting his opium things aside. The door is opened wider and* ONG CHI SENG *comes in.*

*Ong Chi Seng*

This way, sir, please. Come in.

(JOYCE *enters, wearing his topee.*)

*Joyce*

I nearly broke my neck on those stairs.

*Ong Chi Seng*

This is my friend, sir.

*Joyce*

Does he speak English?

*Chung Hi*

Yes, my speakee velly good English. How do you do, sir. I hope you are quite well. Please to come in.

*Joyce*

Good evening. I say, the air in here is awful. Couldn't we have the window open?

*Chung Hi*

Night air velly bad, sir. Him bring fever.

*Joyce*

We'll risk it.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Very good, sir. I will open the window. (*He goes to it and does so.*)

*Joyce*

(*Taking off his topee and putting it down.*) I see you've been smoking.

*Chung Hi*

Yes, my suffer velly bad from my belly. Smokee two, thlee pipes make it more better.

*Joyce*

We'd better get to our business.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir. Business is business, as we say.

*Joyce*

What is your friend's name, Ong?

*Chung Hi*

My callee all same Chung Hi. You no see him written on shop? Chung Hi. General dealer?

*Joyce*

I suppose you know what I've come for?

*Chung Hi*

Yes, sir. My velly glad to see you in my house. My give you my business card. Yes?

*Joyce*

I don't think I need it.

*Chung Hi*

My sell you velly good China tea. All same Suchong. Number one quality. My can sell more cheap than you buy at stores.

*Joyce*

I don't want any tea.

*Chung Hi*

My sell you Swatow silk. Velly best quality. No can get more better in China. Make velly good suits. My sell you cheap.

*Joyce*

I don't want any silk.

*Chung Hi*

Velly well. You take my business card. Chung Hi, General Dealer, 264 Victoria Street. Maybe you want some tomollow or next day.

*Joyce*

Have you got this letter?

*Chung Hi*

Chinese woman have got.

*Joyce*

Where is she?

*Chung Hi*

She come presently.

*Joyce*

Why the devil isn't she here?

*Chung Hi*

She here all night. She come presently. She wait till you come. See?

*Ong Chi Seng*

More better you teli her to come, I think.

*Chung Hi*

Yes, I tell her come this minute. (*He speaks to the* Boy *in Chinese, who gives a guttural, monosyllabic reply and goes out.*) (*To* Joyce.) You sit down. Yes?

*Joyce*

I prefer to stand.

*Chung Hi*

(*Handing him a green tin of cigarettes.*) You smokee cigarette. Velly good cigarette. All same Thlee Castles.

*Joyce*

I don't want to smoke.

*Chung Hi*

(*To* Joyce.) You wantchee buy China tea velly cheap. Number one quality.

*Joyce*

Go to hell.

*Chung Hi*

All light. My no savee. Maybe you likee Swatow silk. No! You wantchee see jade? Have got string number one quality. My sell you one thousand dollars. Velly nice plesent your missus.

*Joyce*

Go to hell.

*Chung Hi*

All light. I smokee cigarette.

(*The door is opened and the* Boy *comes in again with a tray on which are bowls of tea. He takes it to* Joyce, *who shakes his head*

*and turns away. The others help themselves.*)

*Joyce*

Why the devil doesn't this woman come?

*Ong Chi Seng*

I think she come now, sir.

(*There is a scratching at the door.*)

*Joyce*

I'm curious to see her.

*Ong Chi Seng*

My fliend say that poor Mr. Hammond deceased was completely under her thumb, sir.

*Chung Hi*

She no speakee English. She speakee Malay and Chinese.

(*Meanwhile the* Boy *has gone to the door and opened it. The* Chinese Woman *comes in. She wears a silk sarong and a long muslin coat over a blouse. On her arms are heavy gold bangles; she wears a gold chain round her neck and gold pins in her shining, black hair. Her cheeks and mouth are painted, and she is heavily powdered; arched eyebrows make a thin dark line over her eyes.*

*She comes in and walks slowly to the pallet bed and sits on the edge of it with her legs dangling.* ONG CHI SENG *makes an observation to her in Chinese, and she briefly answers. She takes no notice of the white man.*)

*Joyce*

Has she got the letter?

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir.

*Joyce*

Where is it?

*Ong Chi Seng*

She's a very ignorant woman, sir. I think she wants to see the money before she gives the letter.

*Joyce*

Very well.

(*The* CHINESE WOMAN *takes a cigarette from the tin and lights it. She appears to take no notice of what is proceeding.* JOYCE *counts out the ten thousand dollars and hands them to* ONG CHI SENG. ONG CHI SENG *counts them for himself, while* CHUNG HI *watches him. They are all grave, businesslike, and the Chinese are oddly unconcerned.*)

*Ong Chi Seng*

The sum is quite correct, sir.

(*The* Chinese Woman *takes the letter from her tunic and hands it to* Ong Chi Seng. Ong Chi Seng *gives it a glance.*)

This is the right document, sir.

(*He hands it to* Joyce, *who reads it silently.*)

*Joyce*

There's not very much for the money.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I am sure that you will not regret it, sir. Considering all the circumstances, it is what you call dirt cheap.

*Joyce*

(*Ironically.*) I know that you have too great a regard for me to allow me to pay more for an article than the market price.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Shall you want me for anything else to-night, please, sir?

*Joyce*

I don't think so.

*Ong Chi Seng*

In that case, sir, if it is convenient, I will stay here and talk to my friend.

*Joyce*

(*Sardonically.*) I suppose you want to divide the swag.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I am sorry, sir, that that is a word I have not come across in my studies.

*Joyce*

You'd better look it out in the dictionary.

*Ong Chi Seng*

Yes, sir. I will do it without delay.

*Joyce*

I have been wondering how much you were going to get out of this, Ong Chi Seng.

*Ong Chi Seng*

The labourer is worthy of his hire, as Our Lord said, sir.

*Joyce*

I didn't know you were a Christian, Ong.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I am not, sir, to the best of my belief.

*Joyce*

In that case he certainly isn't your Lord.

*Ong Chi Seng*

I was only making use of the common English idiom, sir. In point of fact, I am a disciple of the late Herbert Spencer. I have also been much influenced by Nietzsche, Shaw and Herbert G. Wells.

*Joyce*

It is no wonder that I am no match for you.

(*As he goes out the curtain falls quickly.*)

## Scene II

Scene: *The scene is the same as in Act I. The sitting-room at the Crosbies' bungalow.*

*It is about five o'clock in the afternoon and the light is soft and mellow.*

*When the Curtain rises the stage is empty, but immediately the sound is heard of a car stopping, and* Mrs. Joyce *and* Withers *come up the steps of the verandah and enter the room. They are followed in an instant by the* Head Boy *and another Chinese servant, one with a suit-case and the other with a large basket.* Mrs. Joyce *is a buxom, florid, handsome woman of about forty.*

*Mrs. Joyce*

Good gracious, how desolate the place looks. You can see in the twinkling of an eye that there hasn't been a woman here to look after things.

*Withers*

I must say it does look a bit dreary.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I knew it. I felt it in my bones. That's why I wanted to get here before Leslie. I thought we

might have a chance to do a little something before she came.

(*She goes over to the piano, opens it and puts a piece of music on the stand.*)

*Withers*

A few flowers would help.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I wonder if these wretched boys will have had the sense to pick some. (*To the* HEAD-BOY *who bears the basket.*) Is the ice all right, boy?

*Head-Boy*

Yes, missy.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Well, put it in some place where it won't melt. Are there any flowers?

*Head-Boy*

My lookee see.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*To the other boy.*) Oh, that's my bag. Put it in the spare room.

(*The two servants go out.*)

*Withers*

You know, I can't help wondering how Mrs. Crosbie can bring herself to come back here.

*Mrs. Joyce*

My poor friend, the Crosbies haven't got half a dozen houses to choose from. When you've only one house I suppose you've got to live in it no matter what's happened.

*Withers*

At all events I should have liked to wait a bit.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I wanted her to. I'd made all my plans for them both to come back to my house after the trial. I wanted them to stay with me till they were able to get away for a holiday.

*Withers*

I should have thought that much the most sensible thing to do.

*Mrs. Joyce*

But they wouldn't. Bob said he couldn't leave the estate and Leslie said she couldn't leave Bob. So then I said Howard and I would come down here. I thought it would be easier for them if they had some one with them for a day or two.

*Withers*

(*With a smile.*) And I think you were determined not to be robbed of your celebration.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*Gaily.*) You don't know my million-dollar cocktails, do you? They're celebrated all through the F.M.S. When Leslie was arrested I made a solemn vow that I wouldn't make another until she was acquitted. I've been waiting for this day and no one is going to deprive me of my treat.

*Withers*

Hence the ice, I suppose?

*Mrs. Joyce*

Hence the ice, wise young man. As soon as the others come I'll start making them.

*Withers*

With your own hands?

*Mrs. Joyce*

With my own hands. I don't mind telling you I never knew any one who could make a better cocktail than I can.

*Withers*

(*With a grin.*) We all think the cocktails we make ourselves better than anybody else's, you know.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*Merrily.*) Yes, but you're all lamentably mistaken, and I happen to be right.

*Withers*

The ways of Providence are dark.

(*The two boys come in with bowls of flowers. They place them here and there, so that the room looks exactly as it did during the first act.*)

*Mrs. Joyce*

Oh, good. That makes the room look much more habitable.

*Withers*

They ought to be here in a minute.

*Mrs. Joyce*

We went very fast, you know. And I daresay a good many people wanted to say a word or two to Leslie. I don't suppose they were able to get away as quickly as they expected.

(*The boys go out.*)

*Withers*

I'll wait till they come, shall I?

*Mrs. Joyce*

Of course you must wait.

*Withers*

I thought the Attorney-General was very decent.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I knew he would be. I know his wife, you know. She said she thought Leslie should never be tried at all. But, of course, men are so funny.

*Withers*

I shall never forget the shout that went up when the jury came in and said, "Not guilty."

*Mrs. Joyce*

It was thrilling, wasn't it? And Leslie absolutely impassive, sitting there as though it had nothing to do with her.

*Withers*

I can't get over the way she gave her evidence. By George, she's a marvel.

*Mrs. Joyce*

It was beautiful. I couldn't help crying. It was so modest and so restrained. Howard, who thinks me very hysterical and impulsive, told me the other day he'd never known a woman who had so much self-control as Leslie. And that's real praise, because I don't think he very much likes her.

*Withers*

Why not?

*Mrs. Joyce*

Oh, you know what men are. They never care

very much for the women their particular friends marry.

(*The* HEAD-BOY *comes in with a pillow covered by a cloth.*)

*Withers*

Hulloa, what's this?

*Head-Boy*

Missy pillow lace.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*Going to it and taking the cloth off.*) Oh, did you bring that?

*Head-Boy*

I thought maybe Missy wantchee.

(*He puts it down on the table on which it stood in the first act.*)

*Mrs. Joyce*

I'm sure she will. That was very thoughtful of you, boy. (*To* WITHERS *as the boy goes out.*) You know, sometimes you could kill these Chinese boys, and then all of a sudden they'll do things that are so kind and so considerate that you forgive them everything.

*Withers*

(*Looking at the lace.*) By George, it is beautiful, isn't it? You know, it's just the sort of thing you'd expect her to do.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Mr. Withers, I want to ask you something rather horrible. When you came that night, where exactly was Geoff Hammond's body lying?

*Withers*

Out on the verandah, just under that lamp. By God, it gave me a turn when I ran up the steps and nearly fell over him.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Has it occurred to you that every time Leslie comes into the house she'll have to step over the place where the body lay? It's rather grim.

*Withers*

Perhaps it won't strike her.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Fortunately she's not the sort of hysterical fool that I am. But I—oh, dear, I could never sleep again.

(*There is the sound of a car driving up.*)

*Withers*

There they are. They haven't been so long, after all.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*Going over to the verandah.*) No, they must

have started within ten minutes of us. (*Calling.*) Leslie! Leslie!

(LESLIE *comes in, followed by* CROSBIE *and* JOYCE. CROSBIE *is wearing a neat suit of ducks.* LESLIE *wears a silk wrap and a hat.*)

*Leslie*

You haven't been here long, have you?

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*Taking her in her arms.*) Welcome. Welcome back to your home.

*Leslie*

(*Releasing herself.*) Darling. (*She looks round.*) How nice and cosy it looks. I can hardly realise that I've ever been away.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Are you tired? Would you like to go and lie down?

*Leslie*

Tired? Why, I've been doing nothing but rest for the last six weeks.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Oh, Bob, aren't you happy to have her back again?

*Joyce*

Now, Dorothy, don't gush, and if you must gush, gush over me.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I'm not going to gush over you, you old brute. What have you done?

*Leslie*

(*Holding out her hand to him, with a charming smile.*) He's done everything. I can never thank him enough. You don't know what he's been to me through all this dreary time of waiting.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I don't mind confessing that I thought you made rather a good speech, Howard.

*Joyce*

Thank you for those kind words.

*Mrs. Joyce*

I think perhaps you might have been a little more impassioned without hurting yourself.

*Withers*

I don't agree with you, Mrs. Joyce. It's just because it was so cold and measured and business-like that it was so effective.

*Joyce*

Let's have this drink you've been talking about, Dorothy.

*Mrs. Joyce*

Come and help me, Mr. Withers. When I make a cocktail I want a great many assistants.

*Leslie*

(*Taking off her hat.*) I know what an elaborate business your million-dollar cocktail is, Dorothy.

*Mrs. Joyce*

(*As she goes out with* WITHERS.) Don't be impatient. I can't hurry it. I must take my time.

*Leslie*

I'll go and tidy myself up.

*Crosbie*

You don't need it. You look as if you'd just come out of a bandbox.

*Leslie*

I shan't be a minute.

*Crosbie*

There's something I particularly want to say to you.

*Joyce*

I'll make myself scarce.

*Crosbie*

No, I want you, old man. I want your legal opinion.

*Joyce*

Oh, do you? Fire away.

*Crosbie*

Well, look here, I want to get Leslie away from here as quickly as possible.

*Joyce*

I think a bit of a holiday would do you both good.

*Leslie*

Could you get away, Robert? Even if it's only for two or three weeks I'd be thankful.

*Crosbie*

What's the use of two or three weeks? We must get away for good.

*Leslie*

But how can we?

*Joyce*

You can't very well throw up a job like this. You'd never get such a good one again, you know.

*Crosbie*

That's where you're wrong. I've got something in view that's much better. We can neither of us

live here. It would be impossible. We've gone through too much in this bungalow. How can we ever forget. . . .

*Leslie*

(*With a shudder.*) No, don't, Bob, don't.

*Crosbie*

(*To* Joyce.) You see. Heaven knows, Leslie has nerves of iron, but there is a limit to human endurance. You know how lonely the life is. I should never have a moment's peace when I was out and thought of her sitting in this room by herself. It's out of the question.

*Leslie*

Oh, don't think of me, Bob. You've made this estate, it was nothing when you came here. Why, it's like your child. It's the apple of your eye.

*Crosbie*

I hate it now. I hate every tree on it. I must get away, and so must you. You don't want to stay?

*Leslie*

It's all been so miserable. I don't want to make any more difficulties.

*Crosbie*

I know our only chance of peace is to get to some place where we can forget.

*Joyce*

But could you get another job?

*Crosbie*

Yes, that's just it. Something has suddenly cropped up. That's why I wanted to talk to you about it at once. It's in Sumatra. We'd be right away from everybody, and the only people round us would be Dutch. We'd start a new life, with new friends. The only thing is that you'd be awfully lonely, darling.

*Leslie*

Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I'm used to loneliness. (*With sudden vehemence.*) I'd be glad to go, Robert. I don't want to stay here.

*Crosbie*

That settles it then. I'll go straight ahead and we can fix things up at once.

*Joyce*

Is the money as good as here?

*Crosbie*

I hope it'll be better. At all events I shall be working for myself and not for a rotten company in London.

*Joyce*

(*Startled.*) What do you mean by that? You're not buying an estate?

*Crosbie*

Yes, I am. Why should I go on sweating my life out for other people? It's a chance in a thousand. It belongs to a Malacca Chinaman who's in financial difficulties, and he's willing to let it go for thirty thousand dollars if he can have the money the day after to-morrow.

*Joyce*

But how are you going to raise thirty thousand dollars?

*Crosbie*

Well, I've saved about ten thousand since I've been in the East, and Charlie Meadows is willing to let me have the balance on mortgage.

(LESLIE *and* JOYCE *exchange a glance of consternation.*)

*Joyce*

It seems rather rash to put all your eggs in one basket.

*Leslie*

I shouldn't like you to take such a risk on my account, Robert. You needn't worry about me, really. I shall settle down here quite comfortably.

*Crosbie*

Don't talk nonsense, darling. It's only a moment ago that you said you'd give anything to clear out.

*Leslie*

I spoke without thinking. I believe it would be a mistake to run away. The sensible thing to do is to sit tight. Everybody's been so kind, there's no reason to suppose they're not going to continue. I'm sure all our friends will do all they can to make things easy for us.

*Crosbie*

You know, dear, you mustn't be frightened at a little risk. It's only if one takes risks that one can make big money.

*Joyce*

These Chinese estates are never any good. You know how haphazard and careless the Chinese are.

*Crosbie*

This is not that sort of thing at all. It belongs to a very progressive Chinaman, and he's had a European manager. It's not a leap in the dark. It's a thoroughly sound proposition, and I reckon that in ten years I can make enough money to allow us to retire. Then we'll settle down in England and live like lords.

*Leslie*

Honestly, Robert, I'd prefer to stay here. I'm attached to the place, and when I've had time to forget all that has happened . . .

*Crosbie*

How can you forget?

*Joyce*

Anyhow, it's not a thing that you must enter into without due consideration. You'd naturally want to go over to Sumatra and look for yourself.

*Crosbie*

That's just it. I've got to make up my mind at once. The offer only holds for thirty-six hours.

*Joyce*

But, my dear fellow, you can't pay thirty thousand dollars for an estate without proper investigation. None of you planters are any too business-like, but really there are limits.

*Crosbie*

Don't try to make me out a bigger fool than I am. I've had it examined and it's worth fifty thousand if it's worth a dollar. I've got all the papers in my office. I'll go and get them and you can see for yourself. And I have a couple of photographs of the bungalow to show Leslie.

*Leslie*

I don't want to see them.

*Crosbie*

Oh, come, darling. That's just nerves. That shows how necessary it is for you to get away. Darling, in this case you must let me have my own way. I want to go, too. I can't stay here any more.

*Leslie*

(*With anguish.*) Oh, why are you so obstinate?

*Crosbie*

Come, come, dear, don't be unreasonable. Let me go and get the papers. I shan't be a minute.

(*He goes out. There is a moment's silence.* LESLIE *looks at* JOYCE *with terrified appeal; he makes a despairing gesture.*)

*Joyce*

I had to pay ten thousand dollars for the letter.

*Leslie*

What are you going to do?

*Joyce*

(*Miserably.*) What can I do?

*Leslie*

Oh, don't tell him now. Give me a little time.

I'm at the end of my strength. I can't bear anything more.

*Joyce*

You heard what he said. He wants the money at once to buy this estate. He can't. He hasn't got it.

*Leslie*

Give me a little time.

*Joyce*

*I* can't afford to give you a sum like that.

*Leslie*

No, I don't expect you to. Perhaps I can get it somehow.

*Joyce*

How? You know it's impossible. It's money I put by for the education of my boys. I was glad to advance it, and I wouldn't have minded waiting a few weeks . . .

*Leslie*

(*Interrupting.*) If you'd only give me a month I'd have time to think of something. I could prepare Robert and explain to him by degrees. I'd watch for my opportunity.

*Joyce*

If he buys this estate the money will be gone.

No, no, no. I can't let him do that. I don't want to be unkind to you, but I can't lose my money.

*Leslie*

Where is the letter?

*Joyce*

I have it in my pocket.

*Leslie*

Oh, what shall I do?

*Joyce*

I'm dreadfully sorry for you.

*Leslie*

Oh, don't be sorry for me. I don't matter. It's Robert. It'll break his heart.

*Joyce*

If there were only some other way. I don't know what to do.

*Leslie*

I suppose you're right. There's only one thing to do. Tell him. Tell him and have done with it. I'm broken.

(CROSBIE *comes in again with a bundle of papers in his hand and two large photographs.*)

*Crosbie*

Of course if it hadn't been for Leslie I should have run over to Sumatra last week. I'd just like you to have a look first at the report I've had.

*Joyce*

Look here, Bob, has it struck you that your costs over this affair will be pretty heavy?

*Crosbie*

I know all you lawyers are robbers. I daresay this will leave me a little short of ready money, but I don't suppose you'll mind if I keep you waiting till I've had time to settle down. You know I can be trusted, and if you like I'll pay you interest.

*Joyce*

I don't think you have any idea how large the sum is. Of course, we don't want to press you, but we can't be out of our money indefinitely. I think I should warn you that when you've settled with us, you won't have much money left over to embark in rather hazardous speculations.

*Crosbie*

You're putting the fear of God into me. How much will the costs come to?

*Joyce*

I'm not going to charge you anything for my personal services. Whatever I've done has been done out of pure friendship, but there are certain out-of-pocket expenses that I'm afraid you must pay.

*Crosbie*

Of course. It's awfully good of you not to wish to charge me for anything else. I hardly like to accept. What do the out-of-pocket expenses amount to?

*Joyce*

You remember that I told you yesterday that there was a letter of Leslie's that I thought we ought to get hold of.

*Crosbie*

Yes. I really didn't think it mattered very much, but, of course, I put myself in your hands. I thought you were making a great deal out of something that wasn't very important.

*Joyce*

You told me to do what I thought fit, and I bought the letter from the person in whose possession it was. I had to pay a great deal of money for it.

*Crosbie*

What a bore. Still, if you thought it necessary, I'm not going to grouse. How much was it?

*Joyce*

I'm afraid I had to pay ten thousand dollars for it.

*Crosbie*

(*Aghast.*) Ten thousand dollars! Why, that's a fortune. I thought you were going to say a couple of hundred. You must have been mad.

*Joyce*

You may be quite sure that I wouldn't have given it if I could have got it for less.

*Crosbie*

But that's everything I have in the world. It reduces me to beggary.

*Joyce*

Not that exactly, but you must understand that you haven't got money to buy an estate with.

*Crosbie*

But why didn't you let them bring the letter in and tell them to do what they damned well liked?

*Joyce*

I didn't dare.

*Crosbie*

Do you mean to say it was absolutely necessary to suppress the letter?

*Joyce*

If you wanted your wife acquitted.

*Crosbie*

But . . . but . . . I don't understand. You're not going to tell me that they could have brought in a verdict of guilty. They couldn't have hanged her for putting a noxious vermin out of the way.

*Joyce*

Of course, they wouldn't have hanged her. But they might have found her guilty of manslaughter. I daresay she'd have got off with two or three years.

*Crosbie*

Three years. My Leslie. My little Leslie. It would have killed her. . . . But what was there in the letter?

*Joyce*

I told you yesterday.

*Leslie*

It was very stupid of me. I . . .

*Crosbie*

(*Interrupting.*) I remember now. You wrote to Hammond to ask him to come to the bungalow.

*Leslie*

Yes.

*Crosbie*

You wanted him to get something for you, didn't you?

*Leslie*

Yes, I wanted to get a present for your birthday.

*Crosbie*

Why should you have asked him?

*Leslie*

I wanted to get you a gun. He knew all about that sort of thing, and you know how ignorant I am.

*Crosbie*

Bertie Cameron had a brand new gun he wanted to sell. I went into Singapore on the night of Hammond's death to buy it. Why should you want to make me a present of another?

*Leslie*

How should I know that you were going to buy a gun?

*Crosbie*

(*Abruptly.*) Because I told you.

*Leslie*

I'd forgotten. I can't remember everything.

*Crosbie*

You hadn't forgotten that.

*Leslie*

What do you mean, Robert? Why are you talking to me like this?

*Crosbie*

(*To* JOYCE.) Wasn't it a criminal offence that you committed in buying that letter?

*Joyce*

(*Trying not to take it seriously.*) It's not the sort of thing that a respectable lawyer does in the ordinary way of business.

*Crosbie*

(*Pressing him.*) It was a criminal offence?

*Joyce*

I've been trying to keep the fact out of my mind. But if you insist on a straight answer I'm afraid I must admit it was.

*Crosbie*

Then why did you do it? You, you of all people. What were you trying to save me from?

*Joyce*

Well, I've told you. I felt that . . .

*Crosbie*

(*Hard and stern.*) No, you haven't.

*Joyce*

Come, come, Bob, don't be a fool. I don't know what you mean. Juries are very stupid, and you don't want to let them get any silly ideas in their heads.

*Crosbie*

Who has the letter now? Have you got it?

*Joyce*

Yes.

*Crosbie*

Where is it?

*Joyce*

Why do you want to know?

*Crosbie*

(*Violently.*) God damn it, I want to see it.

*Joyce*

I've got no right to show it you.

*Crosbie*

Is it your money you bought it with, or mine? I've got to pay ten thousand dollars for that letter, and, by God, I'm going to see it. At least I'd like to know that I've had my money's worth.

*Leslie*

Let him see it.

(*Without a word* JOYCE *takes his pocketbook from his pocket and takes out the letter. He hands it to* CROSBIE. *He reads it.*)

*Crosbie*

(*Hoarsely.*) What does it mean?

*Leslie*

It means that Geoff Hammond was my lover.

*Crosbie*

(*Covering his face with his hands.*) No, no, no.

*Joyce*

Why did you kill him?

*Leslie*

He'd been my lover for years. He became my lover almost immediately after he came back from the war.

*Crosbie*

(*In agony.*) It's not true.

*Leslie*

I used to drive out to a place we knew and he met me, two or three times a week, and when Robert went to Singapore he used to come to the bungalow

late, when the boys had gone for the night. We saw one another, constantly, all the time.

*Crosbie*

I trusted you. I loved you.

*Leslie*

And then lately, a year ago, he began to change. I didn't know what was the matter. I couldn't believe that he didn't care for me any more. I was frantic. Oh, if you knew what agonies I endured. I passed through hell. I knew he didn't want me any more, and I wouldn't let him go. Sometimes I thought he hated me. Misery! Misery! I loved him. I didn't want to love him. I couldn't help myself. I hated myself for loving him, and yet he was everything in the world to me. He was all my life.

*Crosbie*

Oh, God! Oh, God!

*Leslie*

And then I heard he was living with a Chinese woman. I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. At last I saw her, I saw her with my own eyes, walking in the village, with her gold bracelets and her necklaces—a Chinese woman. Horrible! They all knew in the kampong that she was his mistress.

And when I passed her, she looked at me, and I saw that she knew I was his mistress too.

*Crosbie*

Oh, the shame.

*Leslie*

I sent for him. I told him I must see him. You've read the letter. I was mad to write it. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't care. I hadn't seen him for ten days. It was a lifetime. And when last we'd parted he held me in his arms and kissed me, and told me not to worry. And he went straight from my arms to hers.

*Joyce*

He was a rotter. He always was.

*Leslie*

That letter. We'd always been so careful. He always tore up any word I wrote to him the moment he'd read it. How was I to know he'd leave that one?

*Joyce*

That doesn't matter now.

*Leslie*

He came, and I told him I knew about the China-woman. He denied it. He said it was only scandal.

I was beside myself. I don't know what I said to him. Oh, I hated him then. I hated him because he'd made me despise myself. I tore him limb from limb. I said everything I could to wound him. I insulted him. I could have spat in his face. And at last he turned on me. He told me he was sick and tired of me and never wanted to see me again. He said I bored him to death. And then he acknowledged that it was true about the Chinawoman. He said he'd known her for years, and she was the only woman who really meant anything to him, and the rest was just pastime. And he said he was glad I knew, and now, at last, I'd leave him alone. He said things to me that I thought it impossible a man could ever say to a woman. He couldn't have been more vile if I'd been a harlot on the streets. And then I don't know what happened; I was beside myself; I seized the revolver and fired. He gave a cry and I saw I'd hit him. He staggered and rushed for the verandah. I ran after him and fired again. He fell, and then I stood over him, and I fired and fired till there were no more cartridges.

(*There is a pause and then* CROSBIE *goes up to her.*)

*Crosbie*

Have I deserved this of you, Leslie?

*Leslie*

No. I've been vile. I have no excuses to offer for myself. I betrayed you.

*Crosbie*

What do you want to do now?

*Leslie*

It is for you to say.

*Crosbie*

It was for your sake I wanted to go away. I only saved that money for you. I shall have to stay here now, but I could manage to give you enough to live on in England.

*Leslie*

Where am I to go? I have no family left and no friends. I'm quite alone in the world. Oh, I'm so unhappy.

*Crosbie*

How could you, Leslie? What did I do wrong that I couldn't win your love?

*Leslie*

What can I say? It wasn't me that deceived you. It wasn't me that loved that other. It was

a madness that seized me, and I was as little my own mistress as though I were delirious with fever. It brought me no happiness, that love—it only brought me shame and remorse.

*Crosbie*

The awful part is that notwithstanding everything —I love you still. Oh, God, how you must despise me. I despise myself.

(LESLIE *shakes her head slowly.*)

*Leslie*

I don't know what I've done to deserve your love. I'm worthless. Oh, if only I could blame anybody but myself. I can't. I deserve everything I have to suffer. Oh, Robert, my dear.

(*He turns aside and buries his head in his hands.*)

*Crosbie*

Oh, what shall I do. It's all gone. All gone.

(*He begins to sob with the great, painful, difficult sobs of a man unused to tears. She sinks on her knees beside him.*)

*Leslie*

Oh, don't cry. Darling. Darling.

(*He springs up and pushes her on one side.*)

*Crosbie*

I'm a fool. There's no need for me to make an exhibition of myself. I'm sorry.

(*He goes hastily out of the room.* LESLIE *rises to her feet.*)

*Joyce*

Don't go to him. Give him a moment to get hold of himself.

*Leslie*

I'm so dreadfully sorry for him.

*Joyce*

He's going to forgive you. He can't do without you.

*Leslie*

If he'd only give me another chance.

*Joyce*

Don't you love him at all?

*Leslie*

No. I wish to God I did.

*Joyce*

Then what's to be done?

*Leslie*

I'll give my life such as it is to him, to him only.

I swear to you that I'll do everything in the world to make him happy. I'll make amends. I'll oblige him to forget. He shall never know that I don't love him as he wants to be loved.

*Joyce*

It's not easy to live with a man you don't love. But you've had the courage and the strength to do evil; perhaps you will have the courage and the strength to do good. That will be your retribution.

*Leslie*

No, that won't be my retribution. I can do that and do it gladly. He's so kind, he's so tender. My retribution is greater. With all my heart I still love the man I killed.

THE END

## APPENDIX

SINCE a play is published not only to gratify an author's vanity, but also for the convenience of amateurs, I have thought it well to print here the version acted at The Playhouse. After two or three rehearsals, I replaced Leslie Crosbie's final confession with a "throwback," because I thought it would bore an audience to listen to two long narratives in one play. I have a notion that an author may prudently take a risk to avoid tediousness.

(*Without a word* JOYCE *takes his pocket-book from his pocket and takes out the letter. He hands it to* CROSBIE. *He reads it.*)

*Crosbie*

(*Hoarsely.*) What does it mean?

*Leslie*

It means that Geoff Hammond was my lover.

*Crosbie*

(*Covering his face with his hands.*) No, no.

*Joyce*

Why did you kill him?

*Leslie*

He'd been my lover for years.

*Crosbie*

(*In agony.*) It's not true.

*Leslie*

For years. And then he changed. I didn't know what was the matter. I couldn't believe that he didn't care for me any more. I loved him; I didn't want to love him. I couldn't help myself. I hated myself for loving him, and yet he was everything in the world to me. He was all my life. And then I heard he was living with a Chinese woman. I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. At last I saw her, I saw her with my own eyes, walking in the village, with her gold bracelets and her necklaces—a Chinese woman. Horrible! They all knew in the kampong that she was his mistress. And when I passed her, she looked at me, and I saw that she knew I was his mistress, too. I sent for him.

(*The stage darkens for a moment. When the lights go up again* LESLIE, *wearing the dress she wore in the first act, is seen seated at the table working at her lace.* GEOFFREY HAMMOND *comes in. He is a good-looking fellow in the late thirties, with a breezy manner and abundant self-confidence.*)

*Leslie*

Geoff! I thought you were never coming.

*Hammond*

What's that bold bad husband of yours gone to Singapore for?

*Leslie*

He's gone to buy a gun that Bertie Cameron wants to sell.

*Hammond*

I suppose he wants to bag that tiger the natives are talking about. I bet I get him first. What about a little drink?

*Leslie*

Help yourself.

(*He goes to a table and pours himself out a whiskey and soda.*)

*Hammond*

I say, is anything the matter? That note of yours was rather hectic.

*Leslie*

What have you done with it?

*Hammond*

I tore it up at once. What do you take me for?

*Leslie*

(*Suddenly.*) Geoff, I can't go on like this any more. I'm at the end of my tether.

*Hammond*

Why, what's up?

*Leslie*

Oh, don't pretend. What's the good of that? Why have you left me all this time without a sign?

*Hammond*

I've had an awful lot to do.

*Leslie*

You haven't had so much to do that you couldn't spare a few minutes to write to me.

*Hammond*

There didn't seem to be any object in taking useless risks. If we don't want a bust-up, we must take certain elementary precautions. We've been very lucky so far. It would be silly to make a mess of things now.

*Leslie*

Don't treat me like a perfect fool.

*Hammond*

I say, Leslie darling, if you sent for me just to make a scene, I'm going to take myself off. I'm sick of these eternal rows.

*Leslie*

A scene? Don't you know how I love you?

*Hammond*

Well, darling, you've got a damned funny way of showing it.

*Leslie*

You drive me to desperation.

(*He looks at her for a moment reflectively, then, with his hands in his pockets, goes up to her with deliberation.*)

*Hammond*

Leslie, I wonder if you've noticed that we hardly ever meet now without having a row.

*Leslie*

Is it my fault?

*Hammond*

I don't say that. I daresay it's mine. But when that happens with two people who are on the sort of terms that we are, it looks very much as though things were wearing a bit thin.

*Leslie*

What do you mean by that?

*Hammond*

Well, when that happens, I'm not sure if the commonsense thing is not to say: "We've had a ripping time, but all good things must come to an end, and the best thing we can do is to make a break while we've still got the chance of keeping friends."

*Leslie*

(*Frightened.*) Geoff.

*Hammond*

I'm all for facing facts.

*Leslie*

(*Suddenly flaming up.*) Facts! What is that Chinawoman doing in your house?

*Hammond*

My dear, what are you talking about?

*Leslie*

Do you think I don't know that you've been living with a Chinawoman for months?

*Hammond*

Nonsense.

*Leslie*

What sort of a fool do you take me for? Why, it's the common gossip of the kampong.

*Hammond*

(*With a shrug of the shoulders.*) My dear, if you're going to listen to the gossip of the natives . . .

*Leslie*

(*Interrupting him.*) Then what is she doing in your bungalow?

*Hammond*

I didn't know there was a Chinawoman about. I don't bother much about what goes on in my servants' quarters as long as they do their work properly.

*Leslie*

What does that mean?

*Hammond*

Well, I shouldn't be surprised if one of the boys had got a girl there. What do I care as long as she keeps out of my way?

*Leslie*

I've seen her.

*Hammond*

What is she like?

*Leslie*

Old and fat.

*Hammond*

You're not paying me a very pretty compliment. My head boy's old and fat, too.

*Leslie*

Your head boy isn't going to dress a woman in silk at five dollars a yard. She had a couple of hundred pounds worth of jewellery on her.

*Hammond*

It sounds as though she were of a thrifty disposition. Perhaps she thinks that the best way to invest her savings.

*Leslie*

Will you swear she's not your mistress?

*Hammond*

Certainly.

*Leslie*

On your honour?

*Hammond*

On my honour.

*Leslie*

(*Violently.*) It's a lie.

*Hammond*

All right then, it's a lie. But in that case, why won't you let me go?

*Leslie*

Because, in spite of everything, I love you with all my heart. I can't let you go now. You're all I have in the world. If you have no love for me,

have pity on me. Without you I'm lost. Oh, Geoff, I love you. No one will ever love you as I've loved you. I know that often I've been beastly to you and horrible, but I've been so unhappy.

*Hammond*

My dear, I don't want to make you unhappy, but it's no good beating about the bush. The thing's over and done with. You must let me go now. You really must.

*Leslie*

Oh, no, Geoff, you don't mean that, you can't mean that.

*Hammond*

Leslie, dear, I'm terribly sorry, but the facts are there and you've got to face them. This is the end and you've got to make the best of it. I've made up my mind, and there it is.

*Leslie*

How cruel. How monstrously cruel. You wouldn't treat a dog as you're treating me.

*Hammond*

Is it my fault if I don't love you? Damn it all, one either loves or one doesn't.

*Leslie*

Oh, you're of stone. I'd do anything in the world for you, and you won't give me a chance.

*Hammond*

Oh, my God, why can't you be reasonable? I tell you I'm sick and tired of the whole thing. Do you want me to tell you in so many words that you mean nothing to me? Don't you know that? Haven't you felt it? You must be blind.

*Leslie*

(*Desperately.*) Yes, I've known it only too well. And I've felt it. I didn't care. It's not love any more that seethes in my heart; it's madness; it's torture to see you, but it's torture ten times worse not to see you. If you leave me now, I'll kill myself. (*She picks up the revolver that is lying on the table.*) I swear to God I'll kill myself.

*Hammond*

(*Impatiently.*) Oh, don't talk such damned rot!

*Leslie*

Don't you think I mean it? Don't you think I have the courage?

*Hammond*

(*Beside himself with irritation.*) I have no patience with you. You're enough to drive any one out of his senses. If you'd got sick of me, would you have hesitated to send me about my business?

Not for a minute. D'you think I don't know women?

*Leslie*

You've ruined my life, and now you're tired of me you want to cast me aside like a worn-out coat. No, no, no!

*Hammond*

You can do what you like, and say what you like, but I tell you it's finished.

*Leslie*

I'll never let you go. Never! Never!

(*She flings her arms round his neck, but he releases himself roughly. The touch of her exasperates him.*)

*Hammond*

I'm fed up. Fed up. I'm sick of the sight of you.

*Leslie*

No, no, no.

*Hammond*

(*Violently.*) If you want the truth you must have it. Yes, the Chinawoman is my mistress, and I don't care who knows it. If you ask me to choose between you and her, I choose her. Every time. And now for God's sake leave me alone.

*Leslie*

You cur!

(*She seizes the revolver and fires at him. He staggers and falls. The lights go out, and the stage is once more in darkness.*)

*Leslie*

I ran after him and fired again. He fell, and then I stood over him and I fired and fired till there were no more cartridges.

(*The lights go up.* CROSBIE *and* JOYCE *are listening to* LESLIE'S *story. She is dressed as at the beginning of the scene.*)

*Crosbie*

Have I deserved this of you, Leslie?

*Leslie*

No, I have no excuses to offer for myself. I betrayed you.

*Crosbie*

What do you want to do now?

*Leslie*

It is for you to say.

*Crosbie*

How could you, Leslie? The awful part is that, notwithstanding everything—I love you still. Oh,

God, how you must despise me. I despise myself.

(LESLIE *shakes her head slowly.*)

*Leslie*

I don't know what I've done to deserve your love. Oh, if only I could blame anybody but myself. I can't. I deserve everything I have to suffer. Oh, Robert, my dear.

(*He turns aside and buries his head in his hands.*)

*Crosbie*

Oh, what shall I do? It's all gone. All gone.

(*He begins to sob with the great, painful, difficult sobs of a man unused to tears. She sinks on her knees beside him.*)

*Leslie*

Oh, don't cry. My dear—my dear.

(*He springs up and pushes her on one side.*)

*Crosbie*

I'm a fool. There's no need for me to make an exhibition of myself. I'm sorry.

(*He goes hastily out of the room.* LESLIE *rises to her feet.*)

*Joyce*

No. Don't go to him. Give him a moment to get hold of himself.

*Leslie*

I'm so dreadfully sorry for him.

*Joyce*

He's going to forgive you. He can't do without you.

*Leslie*

If he'd only give me another chance.

*Joyce*

Don't you love him at all?

*Leslie*

No. I wish to God I did.

*Joyce*

Then what's to be done?

*Leslie*

I swear to you that I'll do everything in the world to make him happy. I'll make amends. I'll oblige him to forget. He shall never know that I don't love him as he wants to be loved.

*Joyce*

It's not easy to live with a man you don't love. But you've had the courage and the strength to do evil; perhaps you will have the courage and the strength to do good. That will be your retribution.

*Leslie*

No, that won't be my retribution. I can do that and do it gladly. He's so kind and good. My retribution is greater. With all my heart I still love the man I killed.

THE END

# THE CONSTANT WIFE

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## *Characters*

*Constance*
*John Middleton, F.R.C.S.*
*Bernard Kersal*
*Mrs. Culver*
*Marie-Louise*
*Martha*
*Barbara*
*Mortimer Durham*
*Bentley*

The action of the play takes place in John's house in Harley Street,

This play was produced on November 1, 1926, at the Ohio Theatre, Cleveland, with the following cast:

CONSTANCE MIDDLETON ..... *Ethel Barrymore*
JOHN MIDDLETON, F.R.C.S. ... *C. Aubrey Smith*
BERNARD KERSAL ..... *Frank Conroy*
MRS. CULVER ..... *Mabel Terry-Lewis*
MARTHA CULVER ..... *Cora Witherspoon*
MARIE-LOUISE DURHAM ..... *Veree Teasdale*
BARBARA FAWCETT ..... *Jeanette Sherwin*
MORTIMER DURHAM ..... *Walter Kingsford*
BENTLEY ..... *Thomas A. Braidon*

*To*

ETHEL BARRYMORE

# The Constant Wife: Act One

## ACT ONE

SCENE: CONSTANCE'S *drawing room. It is a room furnished with singularly good taste.* CONSTANCE *has a gift for decoration and has made this room of hers both beautiful and comfortable.*

*It is afternoon.*

MRS. CULVER *is seated alone. She is an elderly lady with a pleasant face and she is dressed in walking costume. The door is opened and* BENTLEY *the butler introduces* MARTHA CULVER. *This is her daughter and a fine young woman.*

*Bentley*

Miss Culver.

(*He goes out*)

*Martha*

(*With astonishment*) Mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Very calmly*) Yes, darling.

*Martha*

You're the last person I expected to find here. You never told me you were coming to see Constance.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Good humouredly*) I didn't intend to till I saw in your beady eye that *you* meant to. I thought I'd just as soon be here first.

*Martha*

Bentley says she's out.

*Mrs. Culver*

Yes. . . . Are you going to wait?

*Martha*

Certainly.

*Mrs. Culver*

Then I will too.

*Martha*

That'll be very nice.

*Mrs. Culver*

Your words are cordial, but your tone is slightly frigid, my dear.

*Martha*

I don't know what you mean by that, mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

My dear, we've known one another a great many years, haven't we? More than we always find it convenient to mention.

*Martha*

Not at all. I'm thirty-two. I'm not in the least ashamed of my age. Constance is thirty-six.

*Mrs. Culver*

And yet we still think it worth while to be a trifle disingenuous with one another. Our sex takes a natural pleasure in dissimulation.

*Martha*

I don't think any one can accuse me of not being frank.

*Mrs. Culver*

Frankness of course is the pose of the moment. It is often a very effective screen for one's thoughts.

*Martha*

I think you're being faintly disagreeable to me, mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

I, on the other hand, think you're inclined to be decidedly foolish.

*Martha*

Because I want to tell Constance something she ought to know?

*Mrs. Culver*

Ah, I *was* right then. And it's to tell her that you've broken an engagement, and left three wretched people to play cutthroat.

*Martha*

It is.

*Mrs. Culver*

And may I ask why you think Constance ought to know?

*Martha*

Why? Why? Why? That's one of those questions that really don't need answering.

*Mrs. Culver*

I've always noticed that the questions that really don't need answering are the most difficult to answer.

*Martha*

It isn't at all difficult to answer. She ought to know the truth because it's the truth.

*Mrs. Culver*

Of course truth is an excellent thing, but before one tells it one should be quite sure that one does so for the advantage of the person who hears it rather than for one's own self-satisfaction.

*Martha*

Mother, Constance is a very unhappy person.

*Mrs. Culver*

Nonsense. She eats well, sleeps well, dresses well and she's losing weight. No woman can be unhappy in those circumstances.

*Martha*

Of course if you won't understand it's no use my trying to make you. You're a darling, but you're the most unnatural mother. Your attitude simply amazes me.

(*The door opens and* BENTLEY *ushers in* MRS. FAWCETT. MRS. FAWCETT *is a trim, business-like woman of forty*)

*Bentley*

Mrs. Fawcett.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, Barbara, how very nice to see you.

*Barbara*

(*Going up to her and kissing her*) Bentley told me you were here and Constance was out. What are you doing?

*Mrs. Culver*

Bickering.

*Barbara*

What about?

*Mrs. Culver*

Constance.

*Martha*

I'm glad you've come, Barbara. . . . Did you know that John was having an affair with Marie-Louise?

*Barbara*

I hate giving a straight answer to a straight question.

*Martha*

I suppose every one knows but us. How long have you known? They say it's been going on for months. I can't think how it is we've only just heard it.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Ironically*) It speaks very well for human nature that with the masses of dear friends we have it's only to-day that one of them broke the news to us.

*Barbara*

Perhaps the dear friend only heard it this morning.

*Martha*

At first I refused to believe it.

*Mrs. Culver*

Only quite, quite at first, darling. You surrendered to the evidence with an outraged alacrity that took my breath away.

*Martha*

Of course I put two and two together. After the first shock I understood everything. I'm only astonished that it never occurred to me before.

*Barbara*

Are you very much upset, Mrs. Culver?

*Mrs. Culver*

Not a bit. I was brought up by a very strict mother to believe that men were naturally wicked. I am seldom surprised at what they do and never upset.

*Martha*

Mother has been simply maddening. She treats it as though it didn't matter a row of pins.

*Mrs. Culver*

Constance and John have been married for fifteen years. John is a very agreeable man. I've sometimes wondered whether he was any more faithful to his wife than most husbands, but as it was really no concern of mine I didn't let my mind dwell on it.

*Martha*

Is Constance your daughter or is she not your daughter?

*Mrs. Culver*

You certainly have a passion for straight questions, my dear. The answer is yes.

*Martha*

And are you prepared to sit there quietly and let

her husband grossly deceive her with her most intimate friend?

*Mrs. Culver*

So long as she doesn't know I can't see that she's any the worse. Marie-Louise is a nice little thing, silly of course, but that's what men like, and if John is going to deceive Constance it's much better that it should be with some one we all know.

*Martha*

(*To* BARBARA) Did you ever hear a respectable woman—and mother is respectable. . . .

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Interrupting*) Oh, quite.

*Martha*

Talk like that?

*Barbara*

You think that something ought to be done about it?

*Martha*

I am determined that something shall be done about it.

*Mrs. Culver*

Well, my dear, I'm determined that there's at least one thing you shan't do and that is to tell Constance.

*Barbara*

(*A trifle startled*) Is that what you want to do?

*Martha*

Somebody ought to tell her. If mother won't I must.

*Barbara*

I'm extremely fond of Constance. Of course I've known what was going on for a long time and I've been dreadfully worried.

*Martha*

John has put her into an odious position. No man has the right to humiliate his wife as he has humiliated Constance. He's made her perfectly ridiculous.

*Mrs. Culver*

If women were ridiculous because their husbands are unfaithful to them there would surely be a great deal more merriment in the world than there is.

*Barbara*

(*Delighted to have a good gossip*) You know they were lunching together to-day?

*Martha*

We hadn't heard that. But they were dining together the night before last.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Brightly*) We know what they had to eat for dinner. Do you know what they had to eat for luncheon?

*Martha*

Mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

Well, I thought she seemed rather uppish about the lunch.

*Martha*

You have no sense of decency, mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, my dear, don't talk to me about decency. Decency died with dear Queen Victoria.

*Barbara*

(*To* Mrs. Culver) But you can't approve of John having an open and flagrant intrigue with Constance's greatest friend.

*Mrs. Culver*

It may be that with advancing years my arteries have hardened. I am unable to attach any great importance to the philanderings of men. I think it's their nature. John is a very hard-working surgeon. If he likes to lunch and dine with a pretty woman now and then I don't think he's much to

blame. It must be very tiresome to have three meals a day with the same woman for seven days a week. I'm a little bored myself at seeing Martha opposite me at the dinner-table. And men can't stand boredom as well as women.

*Martha*

I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, mother.

*Barbara*

(*Significantly*) But they're not only lunching and dining together.

*Mrs. Culver*

You fear the worst, my dear?

*Barbara*

(*With solemnity*) I know the worst.

*Mrs. Culver*

I always think that's such a comfort. With closed doors and no one listening to us, so long as a man is kind and civil to his wife do you blame him very much if he strays occasionally from the narrow path of virtue?

*Martha*

Do you mean to say that you attach no importance to husbands and wives keeping their marriage vows?

*Mrs. Culver*

I think wives should.

*Barbara*

But that's grossly unfair. Why should *they* any more than men?

*Mrs. Culver*

Because on the whole they like it. We ascribe a great deal of merit to ourselves because we're faithful to our husbands. I don't believe we deserve it for a minute. We're naturally faithful creatures and we're faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else.

*Barbara*

I wonder.

*Mrs. Culver*

My dear, you are a widow and perfectly free. Have you really had any great desire to do anything that the world might say you shouldn't?

*Barbara*

I have my business. When you work hard eight hours a day you don't much want to be bothered with love. In the evening the tired business woman wants to go to a musical comedy or play cards. She doesn't want to be worried with adoring males.

*Martha*

By the way, how is your business?

*Barbara*

Growing by leaps and bounds. As a matter of fact I came here to-day to ask Constance if she would like to come in with me.

*Mrs. Culver*

Why should she? John earns plenty of money.

*Barbara*

Well, I thought if things came to a crisis she might like to know that her independence was assured.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, you want them to come to a crisis too?

*Barbara*

No, of course I don't. But, you know, they can't go on like this. It's a miracle that Constance hasn't heard yet. She's bound to find out soon.

*Mrs. Culver*

I suppose it's inevitable.

*Martha*

I hope she'll find out as quickly as possible. I still think it's mother's duty to tell her.

*Mrs. Culver*

Which I have no intention of doing.

*Martha*

And if mother won't I think I ought.

*Mrs. Culver*

Which I have no intention of permitting.

*Martha*

He's humiliated her beyond endurance. Her position is intolerable. I have no words to express my opinion of Marie-Louise, and the first time I see her I shall tell her exactly what I think of her. She's a horrid, ungrateful, mean and contemptible little cat.

*Barbara*

Anyhow I think it would be a comfort to Constance to know that if anything happened she has me to turn to.

*Mrs. Culver*

But John would make her a handsome allowance. He's a very generous man.

*Martha*

(*Indignantly*) Do you think Constance would accept it?

*Barbara*

Martha's quite right, Mrs. Culver. No woman in those circumstances would take a penny of his money.

*Mrs. Culver*

That's what she'd say. But she'd take care that her lawyer made the best arrangement he could. Few men know with what ingenuity we women can combine the disinterested gesture with a practical eye for the main chance.

*Barbara*

Aren't you rather cynical, Mrs. Culver?

*Mrs. Culver*

I hope not. But when women are alone together I don't see why they shouldn't tell the truth now and then. It's a rest from the weary round of pretending to be something that we quite well know we're not.

*Martha*

(*Stiffly*) I'm not aware that I've ever pretended to be anything I wasn't.

*Mrs. Culver*

I dare say not, my dear. But I've always thought you were a little stupid. You take after your poor father. Constance and I have the brains of the family.

(CONSTANCE *comes into the room. She is a handsome woman of six and thirty. She has been out and wears a hat*)

*Barbara*

(*Eagerly*) Constance.

*Constance*

I'm so sorry I wasn't in. How nice of you all to wait. How are you, mother darling?

(*She kisses them one after another*)

*Martha*

What have you been doing all day, Constance?

*Constance*

Oh, I've been shopping with Marie-Louise. She's just coming up.

*Barbara*

(*With dismay*) Is she here?

*Constance*

Yes. She's telephoning.

*Martha*

(*Ironically*) You and Marie-Louise are quite inseparable.

*Constance*

I like her. She amuses me.

*Martha*

Were you lunching together?

*Constance*

No, she was lunching with a beau.

*Martha*

(*With a glance at* MRS. CULVER) Oh, really. (*Breezily*) John always comes home to luncheon, doesn't he?

*Constance*

(*With great frankness*) When he doesn't have to be at the hospital too early.

*Martha*

Was he lunching with you to-day?

*Constance*

No. He was engaged.

*Martha*

Where?

*Constance*

Good heavens, I don't know! When you've been married as long as I have you never ask your husband where he's going.

*Martha*

I don't know why not.

*Constance*

(*Smiling*) Because he might take it into his head to ask *you*.

*Mrs. Culver*

And also because if you're a wise woman you have confidence in your husband.

*Constance*

John has never given me a moment's uneasiness yet.

*Martha*

You're lucky.

*Constance*

(*With her tongue in her cheek*) Or wise.

(MARIE-LOUISE *appears. She is a very pretty little thing, beautifully dressed, of the clinging, large-eyed type*)

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, I didn't know there was a party.

*Mrs. Culver*

Martha and I are just going.

*Constance*

You know my mother, Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

Of course I do.

*Constance*

She's a very nice mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

With her head screwed on the right way and very active for her years.

(MARIE-LOUISE *kisses* BARBARA *and* MARTHA)

*Marie-Louise*

How do you do.

*Martha*

(*Looking at her dress*) That's new, isn't it, Marie-Louise?

*Marie-Louise*

Yes, I've never had it on before.

*Martha*

Oh, did you put it on because you were lunching with a beau?

*Marie-Louise*

What makes you think I was lunching with a beau?

*Martha*

Constance told me so.

*Constance*

It was only a guess on my part. (*To* MARIE-LOUISE) When we met I noticed that your eyes were shining and you had that pleased, young look a woman always gets when some one has been telling her she's the most adorable thing in the world.

*Martha*

Tell us who it was, Marie-Louise.

*Constance*

Do nothing of the kind, Marie-Louise. Keep it a secret and give us something to gossip about.

*Barbara*

How is your husband, dear?

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, he's very well. I've just been telephoning to him.

*Barbara*

I never saw any one adore his wife so obviously as he adores you.

*Marie-Louise*

Yes, he's sweet, isn't he?

*Barbara*

But doesn't it make you a little nervous sometimes? It must be nerve-racking to be obliged to live up to such profound devotion. It would be a dreadful shock if he ever found out that you were not everything he thought you.

*Constance*

(*Charmingly*) But Marie-Louise is everything he thinks her.

*Marie-Louise*

And even if I weren't I think it would require more than the evidence of his eyes to persuade him.

*Constance*

Listen. There's John. (*She goes to the door and calls*) John! John!

*John*

(*Downstairs*) Hulloa.

*Constance*

Are you coming up? Marie-Louise is here.

*John*

Yes, I'm just coming.

*Constance*

He's been operating all the afternoon. I expect he's tired out.

*Martha*

(*With a look at* MARIE-LOUISE) I dare say he only had a sandwich for luncheon.

(JOHN *comes in. He is a tall, spare man of about forty*)

*John*

Good Lord, I never saw such a lot of people. How is my mother-in-law?

*Mrs. Culver*

Mother-in-lawish.

*John*

(*Kissing her—to* BARBARA) You know, I only married Constance because her mother wouldn't have me.

*Mrs. Culver*

I was too young at the time to marry a boy twenty years younger than myself.

*Constance*

It hasn't prevented you from flirting outrageously with the creature ever since. It's lucky I'm not a jealous woman.

*John*

What have you been doing all day, darling?

*Constance*

I've been shopping with Marie-Louise.

*John*

(*Shaking hands with* MARIE-LOUISE) Oh, how do you do. Did you lunch together?

*Martha*

No, she lunched with a beau.

*John*

I wish it had been me. (*To* MARIE-LOUISE) What have you been doing with yourself lately? We haven't seen you for ages.

*Marie-Louise*

You're never about. Constance and I almost live in one another's pockets.

*John*

How's that rich husband of yours?

*Marie-Louise*

I've just been speaking to him. Isn't it a bore, he's got to go down to Birmingham for the night.

*Constance*

You'd better come and dine with us.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, it's awfully nice of you. But I'm tired out. I shall just go to bed and have an egg.

*John*

I was just going to tell you, Constance. I shan't be in this evening. I've got an acute appendix to do.

*Constance*

Oh, what a nuisance.

*Martha*

You've got a wonderful profession, John. If you ever want to do anything or go anywhere you've only got to say you've got an operation and no one can prove it's a lie.

*Constance*

Oh, my dear, you mustn't put suspicions into my innocent head. It would never occur to John to be so deceitful. (*To* JOHN) Would it?

*John*

I think I'd have to go an awful long way before I managed to deceive you, darling.

*Constance*

(*With a little smile*) Sometimes I think you're right.

*Marie-Louise*

I do like to see a husband and wife so devoted to one another as you and John. You've been married fifteen years, haven't you?

*John*

Yes. And it doesn't seem a day too much.

*Marie-Louise*

Well, I must be running along. I'm late already. Good-bye, darling. Good-bye, Mrs. Culver.

*Constance*

Good-bye, darling. We've had such a nice afternoon.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Giving her hand to* JOHN) Good-bye.

*John*

Oh, I'll come downstairs with you.

*Martha*

I was just going, Marie-Louise. I'll come with you.

*Marie-Louise*

(*With presence of mind*) John, I wonder if you'd mind looking at my knee for a minute. It's been rather painful for the last day or two.

*John*

Of course not. Come into my consulting-room. These knee-caps are troublesome things when you once get them out of order.

*Martha*

(*Firmly*) I'll wait for you. You won't be long, will you? We might share a taxi.

*Marie-Louise*

I've got my car.

*Martha*

Oh, how nice! You can give me a lift then.

*Marie-Louise*

Of course. I shall be delighted.

(JOHN *opens the door for* MARIE-LOUISE. *She goes out and he follows her.* CONSTANCE *has watched this little scene coolly, but with an alert mind*)

*Martha*

What is the matter with her knee?

*Constance*

It slips.

*Martha*

What happens then?

*Constance*

She slips too.

*Martha*

Are you never jealous of these women who come and see John in his consulting-room?

*Constance*

He always has a nurse within call in case they should attempt to take liberties with him.

*Martha*

(*Amiably*) Is the nurse there now?

*Constance*

And anyway I can't help thinking that the sort of woman who wants to be made love to in a consulting-room with a lively odour of antiseptics is the sort of woman who wears horrid undies. I could never bring myself to be jealous of her.

*Martha*

Marie-Louise gave me two of her chemises to copy only the other day.

*Constance*

Oh, did she give you the cerise one with the Irish lace insertions? I thought that sweet. I've copied that.

*Barbara*

It's true that Marie-Louise is very pretty.

*Constance*

Marie-Louise is a darling. But she and John have known each other far too long. John likes her of course, but he says she has no brain.

*Martha*

Men don't always say what they think.

*Constance*

Fortunately, or we shouldn't always know what they feel.

*Martha*

Don't you think John has any secrets from you?

*Constance*

I'm sure of it. But of course a good wife always pretends not to know the little things her husband wishes to keep hidden from her. That is an elementary rule in matrimonial etiquette.

*Martha*

Don't forget that men were deceivers ever.

*Constance*

My dear, you talk like a confirmed spinster. What woman was ever deceived that didn't want to be? Do you really think that men are mysterious? They're children. Why, my dear, John at forty isn't nearly so grown up as Helen at fourteen.

*Barbara*

How is your girl, Constance?

*Constance*

Oh, she's very well. She loves boarding-school, you know. They're like little boys, men. Sometimes of course they're rather naughty and you have to pretend to be angry with them. They attach so much importance to such entirely unimportant things that it's really touching. And they're so helpless. Have you never nursed a man when he's ill? It wrings your heart. It's just like a dog or a horse. They haven't got the sense to come in out of the rain, poor darlings. They have all the charming qualities that accompany general incompetence. They're sweet and good and silly, and tiresome and selfish. You can't help liking them, they're so ingenuous, and so simple. They have no complexity or finesse. I think they're sweet, but it's absurd to take them seriously. You're a wise woman, mother. What do you think?

*Mrs. Culver*

I think you're not in love with your husband.

*Constance*

What nonsense.

(JOHN *comes in*)

*John*

Marie-Louise is waiting for you, Martha. I've just put a little bandage round her knee.

*Constance*

I hope you weren't rough.

*Martha*

(*To* CONSTANCE) Good-bye, dear. Are you coming, mother?

*Mrs. Culver*

Not just yet.

*Martha*

Good-bye, Barbara.

(MARTHA *and* JOHN *go out*)

*Barbara*

Constance, I've got a suggestion to make to you. You know that my business has been growing by leaps and bounds and I simply cannot get along alone any more. I was wondering if you'd like to come in with me.

*Constance*

Oh, my dear, I'm not a business woman.

*Barbara*

You've got marvellous taste and you have ideas. You could do all the decorating and I'd confine myself to buying and selling furniture.

*Constance*

But I've got no capital.

*Barbara*

I've got all the capital I want. I must have help and I know no one more suitable than you. We'd go fifty-fifty and I think I can promise that you'd make a thousand to fifteen hundred a year.

*Constance*

I've been an idle woman so long. I think I'd find it dreadfully hard to work eight hours a day.

*Barbara*

Won't you think it over? It's very interesting, you know. You're naturally energetic. Don't you get bored with doing nothing all the time?

*Constance*

I don't think John would like it. After all, it would look as though he couldn't afford to support me.

*Barbara*

Oh, not nowadays surely. There's no reason that a woman shouldn't have a career just as much as a man.

*Constance*

I think my career is looking after John—run-

ning a house for him, entertaining his friends and making him happy and comfortable.

*Barbara*

Don't you think it rather a mistake to put all your eggs in one basket? Supposing that career failed you?

*Constance*

Why should it?

*Barbara*

Of course I hope it won't. But men, you know, are fluctuating and various. Independence is a very good thing, and a woman who stands on her own feet financially can look upon the future with a good deal of confidence.

*Constance*

It's sweet of you, but so long as John and I are happy together I think I should be a fool to do anything that would vex him.

*Barbara*

Of course I'm in no immediate hurry. One never knows what the future will bring forth. I want you to know that if you change your mind the job is open to you. I don't think I shall ever find any one so competent as you. You have only to say the word.

*Constance*

Oh, Barbara, you are kind to me. It's a splendid offer and I'm ever so grateful to you. Don't think me horrid if I say I hope I shall never need to accept it.

*Barbara*

Of course not. Good-bye, darling.

*Constance*

Good-bye, dear.

(*They kiss, and* BARBARA *goes out.* CONSTANCE *rings the bell*)

*Mrs. Culver*

Are you quite happy, dear?

*Constance*

Oh, quite. Don't I look it?

*Mrs. Culver*

I'm bound to say you do. So far as I can judge by the look of you I should say you haven't a trouble in the world.

*Constance*

You'd be wrong. My cook has given notice and she makes the best meringues I've ever eaten.

*Mrs. Culver*

I like John.

*Constance*

So do I. He has all the solid qualities that make a man a good husband, an agreeable temper, a sense of humour and an entire indifference to petty extravagance.

*Mrs. Culver*

How right you are, darling, to realise that those are the solid qualities.

*Constance*

It's not the seven deadly virtues that make a man a good husband, but the three hundred pleasing amiabilities.

*Mrs. Culver*

Of course one has to compromise in life. One has to make the best of things. One mustn't expect too much from people. If one wants to be happy in one's own way one must let others be happy in theirs. If one can't get this, that and the other the wise thing is to make up one's mind to do without it. The great thing is not to let vanity warp one's reasonable point of view.

*Constance*

Mother, mother, pull yourself together.

*Mrs. Culver*

Everybody's so clever nowadays. They see every-

thing but the obvious. I've discovered that I only have to say it quite simply in order to be thought a most original and amusing old lady.

*Constance*

Spare me, darling.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Affectionately*) If at any time anything went wrong with you, you would tell your mother, wouldn't you?

*Constance*

Of course.

*Mrs. Culver*

I hate the thought that you might be unhappy and let a foolish pride prevent you from letting me console and advise you.

*Constance*

(*With feeling*) It wouldn't, mother dear.

*Mrs. Culver*

I had rather an odd experience the other day. A little friend of mine came to see me and told me that her husband was neglecting her. I asked her why she told me and not her own mother. She said that her mother had never wanted her to marry

and it would mortify her now to have to say that she had made a mistake.

*Constance*

Oh, well, John never neglects me, mother.

*Mrs. Culver*

Of course I gave her a good talking to. She didn't get much sympathy from me.

*Constance*

(*With a smile*) That was very unkind, wasn't it?

*Mrs. Culver*

I have my own ideas about marriage. If a man neglects his wife it's her own fault, and if he's systematically unfaithful to her in nine cases out of ten she only has herself to blame.

*Constance*

(*Ringing the bell*) Systematically is a grim word.

*Mrs. Culver*

No sensible woman attaches importance to an occasional slip. Time and chance are responsible for that.

*Constance*

And shall we say, masculine vanity?

*Mrs. Culver*

I told my little friend that if her husband was

unfaithful to her it was because he found other women more attractive. Why should she be angry with him for that? Her business was to be more attractive than they.

*Constance*

You are not what they call a feminist, mother, are you?

*Mrs. Culver*

After all, what is fidelity?

*Constance*

Mother, do you mind if I open the window?

*Mrs. Culver*

It is open.

*Constance*

In that case do you mind if I shut it? I feel that when a woman of your age asks such a question I should make some sort of symbolic gesture.

*Mrs. Culver*

Don't be ridiculous. Of course I believe in fidelity for women. I suppose no one has ever questioned the desirability of that. But men are different. Women should remember that they have their homes and their name and position and their family, and they should learn to close their eyes when

it's possible they may see something they are not meant to.

(*The butler comes in*)

*Bentley*

Did you ring, Madam?

*Constance*

Yes. I am expecting Mr. Bernard Kersal. I'm not at home to anybody else.

*Bentley*

Very good, madam.

*Constance*

Is Mr. Middleton in?

*Bentley*

Yes, madam. He's in the consulting-room.

*Constance*

Very well.

(*The butler goes out*)

*Mrs. Culver*

Is that a polite way of telling me that I had better take myself off?

*Constance*

Of course not. On the contrary I particularly want you to stay.

*Mrs. Culver*

Who is this mysterious gentleman?

*Constance*

Mother. Bernard.

*Mrs. Culver*

That says nothing to me at all. Not Saint Bernard, darling?

*Constance*

Pull yourself together, my pet. You must remember Bernard Kersal. He proposed to me.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, my dear, you cannot expect me to remember the names of all the young men who proposed to you.

*Constance*

Yes, but he proposed more than any of the others.

*Mrs. Culver*

Why?

*Constance*

I suppose because I refused him. I can't think of any other reason.

*Mrs. Culver*

He made no impression on me.

*Constance*

I don't suppose he tried to.

*Mrs. Culver*

What did he look like?

*Constance*

He was tall.

*Mrs. Culver*

They were all tall.

*Constance*

He had brown hair and brown eyes.

*Mrs. Culver*

They all had brown hair and brown eyes.

*Constance*

He danced divinely.

*Mrs. Culver*

They all danced divinely.

*Constance*

I very nearly married him, you know.

*Mrs. Culver*

Why didn't you?

*Constance*

I think he was a trifle too much inclined to lie down on the floor and let me walk over him.

*Mrs. Culver*

In short he had no sense of humour.

*Constance*

I was quite certain that he loved me, and I was never absolutely sure that John did.

*Mrs. Culver*

Well, you're sure now, dear, aren't you?

*Constance*

Oh, yes. John adores me.

*Mrs. Culver*

And what's this young man coming for to-day?

*Constance*

He's not such a very young man any more. He was twenty-nine then and so he must be nearly forty-five now.

*Mrs. Culver*

He isn't still in love with you?

*Constance*

I shouldn't think so. Do you think it possible after fifteen years? It's surely very unlikely. Don't look at me like that, mother. I don't like it.

*Mrs. Culver*

Don't talk stuff and nonsense to me, child. Of course you know if he's in love with you or not.

*Constance*

But I haven't seen him since I married John.

You see he lives in Japan. He's a merchant or something in Kobe. He was here during the war on leave. But that was when I was so dreadfully ill and I didn't see him.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh! Why's he here now then? Have you been corresponding with him?

*Constance*

No. One can't write letters to any one one never sees for fifteen years. He always sends me flowers on my birthday.

*Mrs. Culver*

That's rather sweet of him.

*Constance*

And the other day I had a letter from him saying he was in England and would like to see me. So I asked him to come to-day.

*Mrs. Culver*

I wondered why you were so smart.

*Constance*

Of course he may be terribly changed. Men go off so dreadfully, don't they? He may be bald and fat now.

*Mrs. Culver*

He may be married.

*Constance*

Oh, if he were I don't think he'd want to come and see me, would he?

*Mrs. Culver*

I see you're under the impression that he's still in love with you.

*Constance*

Oh, I'm not.

*Mrs. Culver*

Then why are you so nervous?

*Constance*

It's only natural that I shouldn't want him to think me old and haggard. He adored me, mother. I suppose he still thinks of me as I was then. It wouldn't be very nice if his face fell about a yard and a half when he came into the room.

*Mrs. Culver*

I think I'd much better leave you to face the ordeal alone.

*Constance*

Oh, no, mother, you must stay. I particularly want you. You see, he may be awful and I may wish I'd never seen him again. It'll be so much easier if you're here. I may not want to be alone with him at all.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh.

*Constance*

(*With a twinkle in her eye*) On the other hand I may.

*Mrs. Culver*

It seems to me you're putting me in a slightly embarrassing situation.

*Constance*

Now listen. If I think he's awful we'll just talk about the weather and the crops for a few minutes and then we'll have an ominous pause and stare at him. That always makes a man feel a perfect fool and the moment a man feels a fool he gets up and goes.

*Mrs. Culver*

Sometimes they don't know how to, poor dears, and the earth will never open and swallow them up.

*Constance*

On the other hand if I think he looks rather nice I shall just take out my handkerchief and carelessly place it on the piano.

*Mrs. Culver*

Why?

*Constance*

Darling, in order that you may rise to your aged feet and say, well, you really must be running along.

*Mrs. Culver*

Yes, I know that, but why should you carelessly place your handkerchief on the piano?

*Constance*

Because I am a creature of impulse. I shall have an impulse to place my handkerchief on the piano.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, very well. But I always mistrust impulses.

(BENTLEY *enters and announces* BERNARD KERSAL. *He is a tall good-looking man, sunburned and of healthy appearance. He is evidently very fit and he carries his forty-five years well*)

*Bentley*

Mr. Kersal.

*Constance*

How do you do. Do you remember my mother?

*Bernard*

(*Shaking hands with her*) I'm sure she doesn't remember me.

(CONSTANCE *takes a small handkerchief out of her bag*)

*Mrs. Culver*

That is the soft answer that turneth away wrath.

*Constance*

It's rather late for tea, isn't it? Would you like a drink?

(*As she says this she goes towards the bell and places her handkerchief on the piano*)

*Bernard*

No, thanks. I've just this moment had one.

*Constance*

To brace you for seeing me?

*Bernard*

I was nervous.

*Constance*

Have I changed as much as you expected?

*Bernard*

Oh, that's not what I was nervous about.

*Mrs. Culver*

Is it really fifteen years since you saw Constance?

*Bernard*

Yes. I didn't see her when I was last in England. When I got demobbed I had to go out to

Japan again and get my business together. I haven't had a chance to come home before.

(CONSTANCE *has been giving her mother significant looks, but her mother does not notice them.* CONSTANCE *takes a second handkerchief out of her bag and when the opportunity arises places it neatly on the piano beside the first one*)

*Mrs. Culver*

And are you home for long?

*Bernard*

A year.

*Mrs. Culver*

Have you brought your wife with you?

*Bernard*

I'm not married.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, Constance said you were married to a Japanese lady.

*Constance*

Nonsense, mother. I never said anything of the sort.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, perhaps I was thinking of Julia Linton. She married an Egyptian pasha. I believe she's very happy. At all events he hasn't killed her yet.

*Bernard*

How is your husband?

*Constance*

He's very well. I dare say he'll be in presently.

*Bernard*

Haven't you got a little sister? I suppose she's out now?

*Mrs. Culver*

He means Martha. She's come out and gone in again.

*Constance*

She was not so very much younger than me, you know. She's thirty-two now.

(MRS. CULVER *has taken no notice of the handkerchiefs and in desperation* CONSTANCE *takes a third from her bag and places it beside the other two*)

*Mrs. Culver*

Do you like the East, Mr. Kersal?

*Bernard*

One has a pretty good time there, you know.

(*Now* MRS. CULVER *catches sight of the three handkerchiefs and starts*)

*Mrs. Culver*

I wonder what the time is.

*Constance*

It's late, mother. Are you dining out to-night? I suppose you want to have a lie-down before you dress for dinner.

*Mrs. Culver*

I hope I shall see you again, Mr. Kersal.

*Bernard*

Thank you very much.

(CONSTANCE *accompanies her to the door*)

*Mrs. Culver*

Good-bye, darling. (*In a whisper*) I couldn't remember if the handkerchiefs meant go or stay.

*Constance*

You had only to use your eyes. You can see at a glance that he is the kind of man one would naturally want to have a heart-to-heart talk with after fifteen years.

*Mrs. Culver*

You only confused me by putting more and more handkerchiefs on the piano.

*Constance*

For goodness' sake, go, mother. (*Aloud*) Good-bye, my sweet. I'm sorry you've got to run away so soon.

*Mrs. Culver*

Good-bye.

(*She goes out and* CONSTANCE *comes back into the room*)

*Constance*

Did you think it very rude of us to whisper? Mother has a passion for secrets.

*Bernard*

Of course not.

*Constance*

Now let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable. Let me look at you. You haven't changed much. You're a little thinner and perhaps a little more lined. Men are so lucky, if they have any character they grow better-looking as they grow older. Do you know I'm thirty-six now?

*Bernard*

What does that matter?

*Constance*

Shall I tell you something? When you wrote and suggested coming here I was delighted at the thought of seeing you again and wrote at once making a date. And then I was panic-stricken. I would have given almost anything not to have sent that letter. And all to-day I've had such a horrible feeling at

the pit of my stomach. Didn't you see my knees wobble when you came into the room?

*Bernard*

In God's name, why?

*Constance*

Oh, my dear, I think you must be a little stupid. I should be a perfect fool if I didn't know that when I was a girl I was very pretty. It's rather a pang when you are forced to the conclusion that you're not quite so pretty as you were. People don't tell one. One tries to hide it from oneself. Anyhow I thought I'd rather know the worst. That's one of the reasons I asked you to come.

*Bernard*

Whatever I thought you can hardly imagine that I should be deliberately rude.

*Constance*

Of course not. But I watched your face. I was afraid I'd see there: By God, how she's gone off.

*Bernard*

And did you?

*Constance*

You were rather shy when you came in. You weren't thinking of me.

*Bernard*

It's quite true, fifteen years ago you were a pretty girl. Now you're lovely. You're ten times more beautiful than you were then.

*Constance*

It's nice of you to say so.

*Bernard*

Don't you believe it?

*Constance*

I think you do. And I confess that's sufficiently gratifying. Now tell me, why aren't you married? It's time you did, you know, or it'll be too late. You'll have a very lonely old age if you don't.

*Bernard*

I never wanted to marry any one but you.

*Constance*

Oh, come, you're not going to tell me that you've never been in love since you were in love with me?

*Bernard*

No, I've been in love half a dozen times, but when it came to the point I found I still loved you best.

*Constance*

I like you for saying that. I shouldn't have be-

lieved it if you'd said you'd never loved anybody else and I should have been vexed with you for thinking me such a fool as to believe it.

*Bernard*

You see, it was you I loved in the others. One because she had hair like yours and another because her smile reminded me of your smile.

*Constance*

I hate to think that I've made you unhappy.

*Bernard*

But you haven't. I've had a very good time; I've enjoyed my work; I've made a bit of money and I've had a lot of fun. I don't blame you for having married John instead of me.

*Constance*

Do you remember John?

*Bernard*

Of course I do. He was a very nice fellow. I dare say he's made you a better husband than I should have. I've had my ups and downs. I'm very irritable sometimes. John's been able to give you everything you wanted. You were much safer with him. By the way, I suppose I can still call you Constance.

*Constance*

Of course. Why not? Do-you know, I think you have a very nice nature, Bernard.

*Bernard*

Are you happy with John?

*Constance*

Oh, very. I don't say that he has never given me a moment's uneasiness. He did once, but I took hold of myself and saw that I mustn't be silly. I'm very glad I did. I think I can quite honestly say that ours has been a very happy and successful marriage.

*Bernard*

I'm awfully glad to hear that. Do you think it's cheek to ask if John loves you?

*Constance*

I'm sure he loves me.

*Bernard*

And do you love him?

*Constance*

Very much.

*Bernard*

May I make you a short speech?

*Constance*

If I may interrupt at suitable moments.

*Bernard*

I hope you're going to let me see a great deal of you during this year I've got at home.

*Constance*

I want to see a great deal of you.

*Bernard*

There's just one thing I want to get off my chest and then I needn't refer to it again. I am just as madly in love with you as I was when I asked you to marry me fifteen years ago. I think I shall remain in love with you all my life. I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. But I want you to know that you needn't have the smallest fear that I shall make a nuisance of myself. I should think it an awfully caddish thing to try to come between you and John. I suppose we all want to be happy, but I don't believe the best way of being that is to try to upset other people's happiness.

*Constance*

That's not such a very long speech after all. At a public dinner they would hardly even call it a few remarks.

*Bernard*

All I ask for is your friendship and if in return I care to give you my love I don't see that it's any one's business but my own.

*Constance*

I don't think it is. I think I can be a very good friend, Bernard.

(*The door opens and* JOHN *comes in*)

*John*

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were engaged.

*Constance*

I'm not. Come in. This is Bernard Kersal.

*John*

How do you do?

*Bernard*

I'm afraid you don't remember me.

*John*

If you ask me point-blank I think it's safer to confess I don't.

*Constance*

Don't be so silly, John. He used to come to mother's.

*John*

Before we were married, d'you mean?

*Constance*

Yes. You spent several week-ends with us together.

*John*

My dear, that was fifteen years ago. I'm awfully sorry not to remember you, but I'm delighted to see you now.

*Constance*

He's just come back from Japan.

*John*

Oh, well, I hope we shall see you again. I'm just going along to the club to have a rubber before dinner, darling. (*To* BERNARD) Why don't you dine here with Constance? I've got an acute appendix and she'll be all alone, poor darling.

*Bernard*

Oh, that's awfully kind of you.

*Constance*

It would be a friendly act. Are you free?

*Bernard*

Always to do a friendly act.

*Constance*

Very well. I shall expect you at eight-fifteen.

THE END OF ACT ONE

# The Constant Wife: Act Two

## ACT TWO

*The Scene is the same as in the First Act.*

*A Fortnight has passed.*

MARTHA *in walking costume and a hat is looking at an illustrated paper.*

BENTLEY *comes in.*

*Bentley*

Mr. Kersal is here, Miss.

*Martha*

Oh! Ask him if he won't come up.

*Bentley*

Very good, Miss. (*He goes out and in a moment comes in again to announce* BERNARD, *and then goes.*) Mr. Kersal.

*Martha*

Constance is dressing. She won't be very long.

*Bernard*

Oh, I see. Well, there's no violent hurry.

*Martha*

You're taking her to Ranelagh, aren't you?

*Bernard*

That was the idea. I know some of the fellows who are playing to-day.

*Martha*

Are you having a good time in London?

*Bernard*

Marvellous. When a man's lived in the East as long as I have, he's apt to feel rather out of it when he comes home. But Constance and John have been ripping to me.

*Martha*

Do you like John?

*Bernard*

Yes. He's been awfully kind.

*Martha*

Do you know, I remember you quite well.

*Bernard*

Oh, you can't. You were a kid when I used to come down and stay with your mother.

*Martha*

I was sixteen. Do you imagine I wasn't thrilled to the marrow by Constance's young men?

*Bernard*

There were a good many of them. I should have thought your marrow got callous.

*Martha*

But you were one of the serious ones. I always thought you terribly romantic.

*Bernard*

I was terribly romantic. I think it's becoming in the young.

*Martha*

I don't think it's unbecoming in the not quite as young.

*Bernard*

Don't think I'm romantic now. I make a considerable income and I'm putting on weight. The price of silk has ousted love's young dream in my manly bosom.

*Martha*

You're an unconscionable liar.

*Bernard*

To which I can only retort that you're excessively rude.

*Martha*

You were madly in love with Constance in those days, weren't you?

*Bernard*

You know, it's so long ago I forget.

*Martha*

I advised her to marry you rather than John.

*Bernard*

Why?

*Martha*

Well, for one thing you lived in Japan. I would have married any one who would take me there.

*Bernard*

I live there still.

*Martha*

Oh, I don't want to marry you.

*Bernard*

I couldn't help suspecting that.

*Martha*

I could never really quite understand what she saw in John.

*Bernard*

I suppose she loved him.

*Martha*

I wonder if she ever regrets that she married John rather than you.

*Bernard*

Well, don't. She's perfectly satisfied with John and wouldn't change him for anything in the world.

*Martha*

It's exasperating, isn't it?

*Bernard*

I don't think so. It must make it much more comfortable for a husband and wife to be content with one another.

*Martha*

You're in love with her still, aren't you?

*Bernard*

Not a bit.

*Martha*

Upon my soul, you've got a nerve. Why, you donkey, you're giving it away all the time. Do you know what you look like when she's in the room? Have you any idea how your eyes change when they rest on her? When you speak her name it sounds as though you were kissing it.

*Bernard*

I thought you were an odious child when you were sixteen, Martha, and now that you're thirty-two I think you're a horrible woman.

*Martha*

I'm not really. But I'm very fond of Constance and I'm inclined to be rather fond of you.

*Bernard*

Don't you think you could show your attachment by minding your own business?

*Martha*

Why does it make you angry because I've told you that no one can see you with Constance for five minutes without knowing that you adore her?

*Bernard*

My dear, I'm here for one year. I want to be happy. I don't want to give trouble or cause trouble. I value my friendship with Constance and I hate the idea that anything should interfere with it.

*Martha*

Hasn't it occurred to you that she may want more than your friendship?

*Bernard*

No, it has not.

*Martha*

You need not jump down my throat.

*Bernard*

Constance is perfectly happy with her husband.

You must think me a damned swine if you think I'm going to butt in and try to smash up a perfectly wonderful union.

*Martha*

But, you poor fool, don't you know that John has been notoriously unfaithful to Constance for ages?

*Bernard*

I don't believe it.

*Martha*

Ask any one you like. Mother knows it. Barbara Fawcett knows it. Every one knows it but Constance.

*Bernard*

That certainly isn't true. Mrs. Durham told me when I met her at dinner two or three days ago that John and Constance were the most devoted couple she'd ever known.

*Martha*

Did Marie-Louise tell you that?

*Bernard*

She did.

(MARTHA *begins to laugh. She can hardly restrain herself*)

*Martha*

The nerve. Marie-Louise. Oh, my poor Bernard. Marie-Louise is John's mistress.

*Bernard*

Marie-Louise is Constance's greatest friend.

*Martha*

Yes.

*Bernard*

If this is a pack of lies I swear I'll damned well wring your neck.

*Martha*

All right.

*Bernard*

That was a silly thing to say. I'm sorry.

*Martha*

Oh, I don't mind. I like a man to be violent. I think you're just the sort of man Constance needs.

*Bernard*

What the devil do you mean by that?

*Martha*

It can't go on. Constance is being made perfectly ridiculous. Her position is monstrous. I thought she ought to be told and as every one else seemed to shirk the job I was prepared to do it my-

self. My mother was so disagreeable about it, I've had to promise not to say a word.

*Bernard*

You're not under the delusion that I'm going to tell her?

*Martha*

No, I don't really think it would come very well from you. But things can't go on. She's bound to find out. All I want you to do is to . . . well, stand by.

*Bernard*

But Marie-Louise has got a husband. What about him?

*Martha*

His only ambition in life is to make a million. He's the sort of a fool who thinks a woman loves him just because he loves her. Marie-Louise can turn him round her little finger.

*Bernard*

Has Constance never suspected?

*Martha*

Never. You've only got to look at her. Really, her self-confidence sometimes is positively maddening.

*Bernard*

I wonder if it wouldn't be better that she never did find out. She's so happy. She's entirely carefree. You've only got to look at that open brow and those frank, trustful eyes.

*Martha*

I thought you loved her.

*Bernard*

Enough to want her happiness above all things.

*Martha*

You *are* forty-five, aren't you? I forgot that for a moment.

*Bernard*

Dear Martha. You have such an attractive way of putting things.

(CONSTANCE'S *voice on the stairs is heard calling:* BENTLEY, BENTLEY)

*Martha*

Oh, there's Constance. I can't imagine where mother is. I think I'll go into the brown room and write a letter.

(BERNARD *takes no notice of what she says nor does he make any movement when she goes out. A moment later* CONSTANCE *comes in*)

*Constance*

Have I kept you waiting?

*Bernard*

It doesn't matter.

*Constance*

Hulloa! What's up?

*Bernard*

With me? Nothing. Why?

*Constance*

You look all funny. Why are your eyes suddenly opaque?

*Bernard*

I didn't know they were.

*Constance*

Are you trying to hide something from me?

*Bernard*

Of course not.

*Constance*

Have you had bad news from Japan?

*Bernard*

No. Far from it. Silk is booming.

*Constance*

Then you're going to tell me that you've just got engaged to a village maiden.

*Bernard*

No, I'm not.

*Constance*

I hate people who keep secrets from me.

*Bernard*

I have no secrets from you.

*Constance*

Do you think I don't know your face by now?

*Bernard*

You'll make me vain. I would never have ventured to think that you took the trouble to look twice at my ugly face.

*Constance*

(*With sudden suspicion*) Wasn't Martha here when you came? She hasn't gone, has she?

*Bernard*

She's waiting for her mother. She's gone into another room to write letters.

*Constance*

Did you see her?

*Bernard*

(*Trying to be very casual*). Yes. We had a little chat about the weather.

*Constance*

(*Immediately grasping what has happened*) Oh—— Don't you think we ought to be starting?

*Bernard*

There's plenty of time. It's no good getting there too early.

*Constance*

Then I'll take off my hat.

*Bernard*

And it's jolly here, isn't it? I love your room.

*Constance*

Do you think it's a success? I did it myself. Barbara Fawcett wants me to go into the decorating business. She's in it, you know, and she's making quite a lot of money.

*Bernard*

(*Smiling to hide his anxiety in asking the question*) Aren't you happy at home?

*Constance*

(*Breezily*) I don't think it necessarily means one's unhappy at home because one wants an occu-

pation. One may very easily grow tired of going to parties all the time. But as a matter of fact I refused Barbara's offer.

*Bernard*

(*Insisting*) You are happy, aren't you?

*Constance*

Very.

*Bernard*

You've made *me* very happy during this last fortnight. I feel as though I'd never been away. You've been awfully kind to me.

*Constance*

I'm very glad you think so. I don't know that I've done anything very much for you.

*Bernard*

Yes, you have. You've let me see you.

*Constance*

I let the policeman at the corner do that, you know.

*Bernard*

You mustn't think that because I take care only to talk to you of quite casual things I don't still love you with all my heart.

*Constance*

(*Quite coolly*) We agreed when first you came back that your feelings were entirely your business.

*Bernard*

Do you mind my loving you?

*Constance*

Oughtn't we all to love one another?

*Bernard*

Don't tease me.

*Constance*

My dear, I can't help being pleased and flattered and rather touched. It is rather wonderful that any one should care for me. . . .

*Bernard*

(*Interrupting*) So much—?

*Constance*

After so many years.

*Bernard*

If any one had asked me fifteen years ago if I could love you more than I loved you then I should have said it was impossible. I love you ten times more than I ever loved you before.

*Constance*

(*Going on with her own speech*) But I don't in the least want you to make love to me now.

*Bernard*

I know. I'm not going to. I know you far too well.

*Constance*

(*Amused and a trifle taken aback*) I don't quite know what you've been doing for the last five minutes.

*Bernard*

I was merely stating a few plain facts.

*Constance*

Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought it was something quite different. I'm afraid you might mistake my meaning if I said I'm quite curious to see how you *do* make love.

*Bernard*

(*Good-humouredly*) I have a notion that you're laughing at me.

*Constance*

In the hope of teaching you to laugh at yourself.

*Bernard*

I've been very good during the last fortnight, haven't I?

*Constance*

Yes, I kept on saying to myself, I wonder if a pat of butter really would melt in his mouth.

*Bernard*

Well, for just a minute I'm going to let myself go.

*Constance*

I wouldn't if I were you.

*Bernard*

Yes, but you're not. I want to tell you just once that I worship the ground you tread on. There's never been any one in the world for me but you.

*Constance*

Oh, nonsense. There have been half a dozen. We are seven.

*Bernard*

They were all you. I love you with all my heart. I admire you more than any woman I've ever met. I respect you. I'm an awful fool when it comes to the point. I don't know how to say all I've got in my heart without feeling like a perfect ass. I love you. I want you to know that if ever you're in trouble I should look upon it as the greatest possible happiness to be allowed to help you.

*Constance*

That's very kind of you. I don't see why I should be in any great trouble.

*Bernard*

Always and in all circumstances you can count on me absolutely. I will do anything in the world for you. If ever you want me you have only to give me a sign. I should be proud and happy to give my life for you.

*Constance*

It's sweet of you to say so.

*Bernard*

Don't you believe it?

*Constance*

(*With a charming smile*) Yes.

*Bernard*

I should like to think that it meant—oh, not very much, but just a little to you.

*Constance*

(*Almost shaken*) It means a great deal. I thank you.

*Bernard*

Now we won't say anything more about it.

*Constance*

(*Recovering her accustomed coolness*) But why did you think it necessary to say all this just now?

*Bernard*

I wanted to get it off my chest.

*Constance*

Oh, really.

*Bernard*

You're not angry with me?

*Constance*

Oh, Bernard, I'm not that kind of a fool at all. . . . It's a pity that Martha doesn't marry.

*Bernard*

Don't think that I'm going to marry her.

*Constance*

I don't. I merely thought that a husband would be a pleasant and useful occupation for her. She's quite a nice girl, you know. A liar, of course, but otherwise all right.

*Bernard*

Oh?

*Constance*

Yes, a terrible liar, even for a woman. . . . Shall we start now? It's no good getting there when the polo is over.

*Bernard*

All right. Let's start.

*Constance*

I'll put my hat on again. By the way, you haven't had a taxi waiting all this time, have you?

*Bernard*

No, I've got a car. I thought I'd like to drive you down myself.

*Constance*

Open or shut?

*Bernard*

Open.

*Constance*

Oh, my dear, then I must get another hat. A broad brim like this is such a bore in an open car.

*Bernard*

Oh, I am sorry.

*Constance*

It doesn't matter a bit. I shall only be a minute. And why on earth shouldn't one be comfortable if one can!

(*She goes out. In a moment* BENTLEY *shows in* MARIE-LOUISE)

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, how do you do. (*To* BENTLEY) Will you tell Mr. Middleton at once?

*Bentley*

Yes, Madam.

(*Exit* BENTLEY)

*Marie-Louise*

(*Rather flustered*) I particularly wanted to see John for a minute and there are patients waiting to see him, so I asked Bentley if he couldn't come here.

*Bernard*

I'll take myself off.

*Marie-Louise*

I'm awfully sorry, but it's rather urgent. John hates to be disturbed like this.

*Bernard*

I'll go into the next room.

*Marie-Louise*

Are you waiting for Constance?

*Bernard*

Yes, I'm taking her to Ranelagh. She's changing her hat.

*Marie-Louise*

I see. Bentley told me she was upstairs. Good-bye. I shall only be a minute. (BERNARD *goes into the adjoining room just as* JOHN *comes in*) Oh,

John, I'm sorry to drag you away from your patients.

*John*

There's nothing urgent. They can wait for a few minutes. (BERNARD *has closed the door behind him, and* JOHN'S *tone changes. They speak now in a low voice and quickly*) Is anything the matter?

*Marie-Louise*

Mortimer.

*John*

What about Mortimer?

*Marie-Louise*

I'm convinced he suspects.

*John*

Why?

*Marie-Louise*

He was so funny last night. He came into my room to say good-night to me. He sat on my bed. He was chatting nicely and he was asking what I'd been doing with myself all the evening. . . .

*John*

Presumably you didn't tell him.

*Marie-Louise*

No, I said I'd been dining here. And suddenly

he got up and just said good-night and went out. His voice was so strange that I couldn't help looking at him. He was as red as a turkey cock.

*John*

Is that all?

*Marie-Louise*

He never came in to say good-morning to me before he went to the City.

*John*

He may have been in a hurry.

*Marie-Louise*

He's never in too much of a hurry for that.

*John*

I think you're making a mountain of a mole heap.

*Marie-Louise*

Don't be stupid, John. Can't you see I'm as nervous as a cat?

*John*

I can. But I'm trying to persuade you there's nothing to be nervous about.

*Marie-Louise*

What fools men are. They never will see that it's the small things that matter. I tell you I'm frightened out of my wits.

*John*

You know there's a devil of a distance between Suspicion and proof.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, I don't think he could prove anything. But he can make himself awfully unpleasant. Supposing he put ideas in Constance's head?

*John*

She'd never believe him.

*Marie-Louise*

If the worst came to worst I could manage Mortimer. He's awfully in love with me. That always gives one such an advantage over a man.

*John*

Of course you can twist Mortimer round your little finger.

*Marie-Louise*

I should die of shame if Constance knew. After all, she's my greatest friend and I'm absolutely devoted to her.

*John*

Constance is a peach. Of course I don't believe there's anything in this at all, but if there were, I'd be in favour of making a clean breast of it to Constance.

*Marie-Louise*

Never!

*John*

I expect she'd kick up a row. Any woman would. But she'd do anything in the world to help us out.

*Marie-Louise*

A lot you know about women. She'd help you out, I dare say. But she'd stamp on me with both feet. That's only human nature.

*John*

Not Constance's.

*Marie-Louise*

Upon my word, it's lucky I'm fairly sure of you, John, or the way you talk of Constance would really make me jealous.

*John*

Thank God you can smile. You're getting your nerve back.

*Marie-Louise*

It's been a comfort to talk it over. It doesn't seem so bad now.

*John*

I'm sure you've got nothing to be frightened about.

*Marie-Louise*

I dare say it was only my fancy. It was a stupid risk to take all the same.

*John*

Perhaps. Why did you look so devilish pretty?

*Marie-Louise*

Oughtn't you to be getting back to your wretched patients?

*John*

I suppose so. Will you stop and see Constance?

*Marie-Louise*

I may as well. It would look rather odd if I went away without saying how d'you do to her.

*John*

(*Going*) I'll leave you then. And don't worry.

*Marie-Louise*

I won't. I dare say it was only a guilty conscience. I'll go and have my hair washed.

(*As* JOHN *is about to go,* MARTHA *comes in followed by* BERNARD)

*Martha*

(*With an almost exaggerated cordiality*) I had no idea you were here, Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

It's not very important.

*Martha*

I was just writing letters, waiting for mother, and Bernard's only just told me.

*Marie-Louise*

I wanted to see John about something.

*Martha*

I hope you haven't got anything the matter with you, darling.

*Marie-Louise*

No. Mortimer's been looking rather run-down lately and I want John to persuade him to take a holiday.

*Martha*

Oh, I should have thought he'd be more likely to take a physician's advice than a surgeon's in a thing like that.

*Marie-Louise*

He's got a tremendous belief in John, you know.

*Martha*

In which I'm sure he's justified. John is so very reliable.

*John*

What can I do for you, Martha? If you'd like me to cut out an appendix or a few tonsils I shall be happy to oblige you.

*Martha*

My dear John, you've only left me the barest necessities of existence as it is. I don't think I could manage with anything less than I have.

*John*

My dear, as long as a woman has a leg to stand on she need not despair of exciting her surgeon's sympathy and interest.

(CONSTANCE *comes in with* MRS. CULVER)

*Marie-Louise*

(*Kissing her*) Darling.

*Constance*

How is your knee, still slipping?

*Marie-Louise*

It always gives me more or less trouble, you know.

*Constance*

Yes, of course. I think you're very patient. In your place I should be furious with John. Of course I would never dream of consulting him if I had anything the matter with me.

*Mrs. Culver*

I'm sorry I've been so long, Martha. Have you been very impatient?

*Martha*

No, I've been passing the time very pleasantly.

*Mrs. Culver*

For others, darling, or only for yourself?

*Constance*

I met mother on the stairs and she came up with me while I changed my hat. Bernard is taking me down to Ranelagh.

*John*

Oh, that'll be jolly.

*Bernard*

We shall be dreadfully late.

*Constance*

Does it matter?

*Bernard*

No.

(BENTLEY *comes in with a card on a small salver and takes it to* CONSTANCE. *She looks at the card and hesitates*)

*Constance*

How very odd.

*John*

What's the matter, Constance?

*Constance*

Nothing. (*For an instant she reflects.*) Is he downstairs?

*Bentley*

Yes, Madam.

*Constance*

I don't know why he should send up a card. Show him up.

*Bentley*

Very good, Madam.

(*Exit* BENTLEY)

*John*

Who is it, Constance?

*Constance*

Come and sit down, Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

I must go and so must you.

*Constance*

There's plenty of time. Do you like this hat?

*Marie-Louise*

Yes. I think it's sweet.

*Constance*

What are *you* doing here, John? Haven't you got any patients to-day?

*John*

Yes, there are two or three waiting. I'm just going down. As a matter of fact I thought I deserved a cigarette. (*He puts his hand to his hip pocket*) Hang, I've mislaid my cigarette-case. You haven't seen it about, Constance?

*Constance*

No, I haven't.

*John*

I looked for it everywhere this morning. I can't think where I left it. I must ring up the nursing-home and ask if I left it there.

*Constance*

I hope you haven't lost it.

*John*

Oh, no. I'm sure I haven't. I've just put it somewhere.

(*The door opens and* BENTLEY *announces the visitor.*)

*Bentley*

Mr. Mortimer Durham.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Startled out of her wits*) Oh!

*Constance*

(*Quickly, seizing her wrist*) Sit still, you fool (MORTIMER DURHAM *comes in. He is a stoutish, biggish man of about forty, with a red face and an irascible manner. At the moment he is a prey to violent emotion.* BENTLEY *goes out*) Hulloa, Mortimer. What are you doing in these parts at this hour? Why on earth did you send up a card?

(*He stops and looks around*)

*Marie-Louise*

What is the matter, Mortimer?

*Mortimer*

(*To* CONSTANCE, *with difficulty restraining his fury*) I thought you might like to know that your husband is my wife's lover.

*Marie-Louise*

Morty!

*Constance*

(*Keeping a firm hand on* MARIE-LOUISE *and very coolly to* MORTIMER) Oh? What makes you think that?

*Mortimer*

(*Taking a gold cigarette-case out of his pocket*) Do you recognize this? I found it under my wife's pillow last night.

*Constance*

Oh, I am relieved. I couldn't make out where I'd left it. (*Taking it from him*) Thank you so much.

*Mortimer*

(*Angrily*) It's not yours.

*Constance*

Indeed it is. I was sitting on Marie-Louise's bed and I must have slipped it under the pillow without thinking.

*Mortimer*

It has John's initials on it.

*Constance*

I know. It was presented to him by a grateful patient and I thought it much too nice for him, so I just took it.

*Mortimer*

What sort of fool do you take me for, Constance?

*Constance*

My dear Morty, why should I say it was my cigarette case if it wasn't?

*Mortimer*

They had dinner together.

*Constance*

My poor Morty, I know that. You were going to a City banquet or something, and Marie-Louise rang up and asked if she might come and take pot-luck with us.

*Mortimer*

Do you mean to say she dined here?

*Constance*

Isn't that what she told you?

*Mortimer*

Yes.

*Constance*

It's quite easy to prove. If you won't take my word for it we can ring for the butler and you can ask him yourself. . . . Ring the bell, John, will you?

*Mortimer*

(*Uneasily*) No, don't do that. If you give me your word, of course I must take it.

*Constance*

That's very kind of you. I'm grateful to you for not exposing me to the humiliation of making my butler corroborate my statement.

*Mortimer*

If Marie-Louise was dining here why were you sitting on her bed?

*Constance*

John had to go out and do an operation, and Marie-Louise wanted to show me the things she'd got from Paris, so I walked round to your house. It was a lovely night. You remember that, don't you?

*Mortimer*

Damn it, I've got more important things to do than look at the night.

*Constance*

We tried them all on and then we were rather tired, so Marie-Louise got into bed and I sat down and we talked.

*Mortimer*

If you were tired why didn't you go home and go to bed?

*Constance*

John had promised to come round and fetch me.

*Mortimer*

And did he? At what time did he come?

*John*

I couldn't manage it. The operation took much longer than I expected. It was one of those cases

where when you once start cutting you really don't know where to stop. You know the sort of thing, don't you, Mortimer?

*Mortimer*

No, I don't. How the devil should I?

*Constance*

All that is neither here nor there. This is a terrible accusation you've made against John and Marie-Louise and I'm very much upset. But I will remain perfectly calm till I've heard everything. Now let me have your proofs.

*Mortimer*

My proofs? What d'you mean? The cigarette-case. When I found the cigarette-case I naturally put two and two together.

*Constance*

(*With her eyes flashing*) I quite understand, but why did you make them five?

*Mortimer*

(*Emphatically, in order not to show that he is wavering*) It isn't possible that I should have made a mistake.

*Constance*

Even the richest of us may err. I remember when Mr. Pierpont Morgan died, he was found to own seven million dollars' of worthless securities.

*Mortimer*

(*Uneasily*) You don't know what a shock it was, Constance. I had the most implicit confidence in Marie-Louise. I was knocked endways. I've been brooding over it ever since till I was afraid I should go mad.

*Constance*

And do you mean to say that you've come here and made a fearful scene just because you found my cigarette-case in Marie-Louise's room? I can't believe it. You're a man of the world and a business man. You're extremely intelligent. Surely you have something to go upon. You must be holding something back. Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings. You've said so much now that I must insist on your saying everything. I want the truth and the whole truth.

(*There is a pause.* MORTIMER *looks from* MARIE-LOUISE, *who is quietly weeping, to* CONSTANCE, *with the utmost bewilderment*)

*Mortimer*

I'm afraid I've made a damned fool of myself.

*Constance*

I'm afraid you have.

*Mortimer*

I'm awfully sorry, Constance. I beg your pardon.

*Constance*

Oh, don't bother about me. You've exposed me to the most bitter humiliation. You've sown seeds of distrust between me and John which can never be. . . .

(*She looks for a word*)

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Supplying it*) Fertilized.

*Constance*

(*Ignoring it*) Uprooted. But I don't matter. It's Marie-Louise's pardon you must beg.

*Mortimer*

(*Humbly*) Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

Don't touch me. Don't come near me.

*Mortimer*

(*To* CONSTANCE, *miserably*) You know what jealousy is.

*Constance*

Certainly not. I think it's a most ugly and despicable vice.

*Mortimer*

(*To Marie-Louise*) Marie-Louise, I'm sorry. Won't you forgive me?

*Marie-Louise*

You've insulted me before all my friends. You know how devotedly I love Constance. You might have accused me of having an affair with any one else—but not John.

*Constance*

Not her greatest friend's husband. The milkman or the dustman if you like, but not her greatest friend's husband.

*Mortimer*

I've been a perfect swine. I don't know what came over me. I really wasn't responsible for my actions.

*Marie-Louise*

I've loved you all these years. No one has ever loved you as I've loved you. Oh, it's cruel, cruel.

*Mortimer*

Come away, darling. I can't say here what I want to say.

*Marie-Louise*

No, no, no.

*Constance*

(*Putting her hand on his arm, gently*) I think

you'd better leave her here for a little while, Morty. I'll talk to her when you've gone. She's naturally upset. A sensitive little thing like that.

*Mortimer*

We're dining with the Vancouver's at 8.15.

*Constance*

For eighty-thirty. I promise I'll send her home in good time to dress.

*Mortimer*

She'll give me another chance?

*Constance*

Yes, yes.

*Mortimer*

I'd do anything in the world for her. (CONSTANCE *puts her fingers to her lips and then points significantly to the pearl chain she is wearing. For a second* MORTIMER *does not understand, but as soon as her notion dawns on him he gives a pleased nod*) You're the cleverest woman in the world. (*As he goes out he stops and holds out his hand to* JOHN) Will you shake hands with me, old man? I made a mistake and I'm man enough to acknowledge it.

*John*

(*Very cordially*) Not at all, old boy. I quite

agree that it did look fishy, the cigarette-case. If I'd dreamt that Constance was going to leave an expensive thing like that lying about all over the place, I'm hanged if I'd have let her pinch it.

*Mortimer*

You don't know what a weight it is off my mind. I felt a hundred when I came here, and now I feel like a two-year-old.

(*He goes out. The moment the door is closed behind him there is a general change in every attitude. The tension disappears and there is a feeling of relief*)

*John*

Constance, you're a brick. I shall never forget this. Never, so long as I live. And by George, what presence of mind you showed. I went hot and cold all over, and you never batted an eye-lash.

*Constance*

By the way, here is your cigarette-case. You'd better have a ring made and hang it on your key-chain.

*John*

No, no. Keep it. I'm too old to take these risks.

*Constance*

By the way, did any one see you go into Morty's house last night?

*John*

No, we let ourselves in with Marie-Louise's latch key.

*Constance*

That's all right then. If Mortimer asks the servants they can tell him nothing. I had to take that chance.

*Marie-Louise*

(*With a little gesture of ashamed dismay*) Oh, Constance, what must you think of me?

*Constance*

I? Exactly the same as I thought before. I think you're sweet, Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

You have every right to be angry with me.

*Constance*

Perhaps, but not the inclination.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, it's not true. I've treated you shamefully. You've made me feel such a pig. And you had your chance to get back on me and you didn't take it. I'm so ashamed.

*Constance*

(*Amused*) Because you've been having an affair with John, or because you've been found out?

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, Constance, don't be heartless. Say anything you like, curse me, stamp on me, but don't smile at me. I'm in a terrible position.

*Constance*

And you want me to make a scene. I know and I sympathize. (*Very calmly*) But the fact is that Mortimer told me nothing I didn't know before.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Aghast*) Do you mean to say that you've known all along?

*Constance*

All along, darling. I've been spending the last six months in a desperate effort to prevent my friends and relations from telling me your ghastly secret. It's been very difficult sometimes. Often mother's profound understanding of life, Martha's passion for truth at any price, and Barbara's silent sympathy, have almost worn me down. But until to-day the t's were not definitely crossed nor the i's distinctly dotted, and I was able to ignore the facts that were staring at me—rather rudely, I must say—in the face.

*Marie-Louise*

But why, why? It's not human. Why didn't you do anything?

*Constance*

That, darling, is my affair.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Thinking she understands*) Oh, I see.

*Constance*

(*Rather tartly*) No, you don't. I have always been absolutely faithful to John. I have not winked at your intrigue in order to cover my own.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Beginning to be a little put out*) I almost think you've been laughing at me up your sleeve all the time.

*Constance*

(*Good-humouredly*) Oh, my dear, you mustn't be offended just because I've taken away from you the satisfaction of thinking that you have been deceiving me all these months. I should hate you to think me capable of an intentional meanness.

*Marie-Louise*

My head's going round and round.

*Constance*

Such a pretty head, too. Why don't you go and lie down? You want to look your best if you're dining with the Vancouvers.

*Marie-Louise*

I wonder where Mortimer is?

*Constance*

You know that pearl necklace you showed me the other day and you said that Mortimer thought it cost a lot of money—well, he's gone to Cartier's to buy it for you.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Excitedly*) Oh, Constance, do you think he has?

*Constance*

I think all men are born with the knowledge that when they have wounded a woman's soul—and our souls are easily wounded—the only cure is a trifling, but expensive, jewel.

*Marie-Louise*

Do you think he'll have the sense to bring it home with him so that I can wear it to-night?

*Constance*

Oh, my dear, don't be such a fool as to accept it with alacrity. Remember that Mortimer has grievously insulted you, he's made the most shocking accusation that a man can make against his wife, he's trampled on your love and now he's destroyed your trust in him.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, how right you are, Constance.

*Constance*

Surely I need not tell you what to do. Refuse to speak to him, but never let him get a word of defense in edgeways. Cry enough to make him feel what a brute he is, but not enough to make your eyes swell. Say you'll leave him and run sobbing to the door, but take care to let him stop you before you open it. Repeat yourself. Say the same thing over and over again—it wears them down—and if he answers you take no notice, but just say it again. And at last when you've reduced him to desperation, when his head is aching as though it would split, when he's sweating at every pore, when he's harassed and miserable and haggard and broken—then consent as an unmerited favor, as a sign of your forgiving temper and the sweetness of your nature, to accept, no, don't consent, *deign* to accept the pearl necklace for which the wretch has just paid ten thousand pounds.

*Marie-Louise*

(*With peculiar satisfaction*) Twelve, darling.

*Constance*

And don't thank him. That wouldn't be playing

the game. Let him thank *you* for the favour you do him in allowing him to make you a paltry gift. Have you got your car here?

*Marie-Louise*

No, I was in such a state when I came I took a taxi.

*Constance*

John, do take Marie-Louise down and put her in a taxi.

*John*

All right.

*Marie-Louise*

No, not John. I couldn't. After all, I have some delicacy.

*Constance*

Oh, have you? Well, let Bernard go.

*Bernard*

I shall be pleased.

*Constance*

(*To Bernard*) But come back, won't you?

*Bernard*

Certainly.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Kissing Constance*) This has been a lesson to

me, darling. I'm not a fool, Constance. I can learn.

*Constance*

At least prudence, I hope.

(MARIE-LOUISE *goes out followed by* BERNARD KERSAL)

*John*

How did you guess that Marie-Louise had said she was dining here?

*Constance*

She's too crafty a woman to invent a new lie when an old one will serve.

*John*

It would have been awkward if Mortimer had insisted on asking Bentley if it was true.

*Constance*

I knew he wouldn't dare. It's only if a man's a gentleman that he won't hesitate to do an ungentlemanly thing. Mortimer is on the boundary line and it makes him careful.

*Martha*

(*Significantly*) Don't you imagine your patients are growing a trifle restless, John?

*John*

I like to keep them waiting. They grow more and more nervous as the minutes pass and when I recommend an operation that will cost them two hundred and fifty pounds they are too shaken to protest.

*Martha*

(*Pursing her lips*) I can't imagine you'll very much like to hear what I'm determined to say to Constance.

*John*

It's because I shrewdly suspect that you have some very unpleasant things to say about me that I am prepared reluctantly to neglect the call of duty and listen to you with my own ears.

*Constance*

She's been exercising miracles of restraint for the last three months, John. I think she has a right to let herself go now.

*John*

If she's suffering from suppressed desires she's come to the wrong establishment. She ought to go to a psycho-analyst.

*Martha*

I've only got one thing to say, John, and I'm perfectly willing that you should hear it. (*To* Con-

STANCE) I don't know what your reasons were for shielding that abominable woman. I can only suppose you wanted to avoid more scandal than was necessary. . . .

*Mrs. Culver*

(*Interrupting*) Before you go any further, my dear, you must let me put my word in. (*To* CONSTANCE) My dear child, I beg you not to decide anything in a hurry. We must all think things over. First of all you must listen to what John has to say for himself.

*Martha*

What can he have to say for himself?

*Constance*

(*Ironically*) What indeed?

*John*

Not the right thing anyway. I've seen too much of married life. . . .

*Constance*

(*Interrupting, with a smile*) Let us be just. Other people's rather than your own.

*John*

(*Going on*) To imagine that even the Archangel Gabriel could say the right thing.

*Constance*

I've no reason, however, to suppose that the Archangel Gabriel could ever find himself in such a predicament.

*John*

I'm for it and I'm prepared to take what's coming to me.

*Constance*

(*To the world in general*) No man could say handsomer than that.

*John*

I'm expecting you to make a scene, Constance. It's your right and your privilege. I'm willing to bear it. Give me hell. I deserve it. Drag me up and down the room by the hair of the head. Kick me in the face. Stamp on me. I'll grovel. I'll eat the dust. My name is mud. Mud.

*Constance*

My poor John, what is there to make a scene about?

*John*

I know how badly I've treated you. I had a wife who was good, loving and faithful, devoted to my interests, a perfect mother and an excellent housekeeper. A woman ten times too good for me. If I'd had the smallest spark of decency I couldn't

have treated you like this. I haven't a word to say for myself.

*Martha*

(*Interrupting him*) You've humiliated her to all her friends.

*John*

I've behaved neither like a gentleman nor a sportsman.

*Martha*

Your conduct is inexcusable.

*John*

I haven't a leg to stand on.

*Martha*

Even if you didn't love her, you might have treated her with respect.

*John*

I've been as heartless as a crocodile and as unscrupulous as a typhoid bacillus.

*Constance*

Between you, of course, you're leaving me very little to say.

*Martha*

There *is* nothing to say. You're quite right. This is the sort of occasion when it's beneath a woman's dignity to make a scene. It just shows how little

John knows women to think that you could demean yourself to vulgar abuse. (*To* JOHN) I suppose you'll have the decency to put no obstacle in the way of Constance's getting her freedom.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, Constance, you're not going to divorce him?

*Martha*

Mother, you're so weak. How can she go on living with a man for whom she has no respect? What would her life be with this creature whom she can only mistrust and despise? Besides, you have to think of their child. How can Constance allow her daughter to be contaminated by the society of a person of this character?

*Constance*

John has always been an excellent father. Let us give the devil his due.

*Mrs. Culver*

Don't be too hard, darling. I can understand that at the moment you feel bitter, but it would be very sad if you let your bitterness warp your judgment.

*Constance*

I don't feel in the least bitter. I wish I looked as sweet as I feel.

*Mrs. Culver*

You can't deceive a mother, my dear. I know the angry resentment that you feel. Under the unfortunate circumstances it's only too natural.

*Constance*

When I look into my heart I can't find a trace of resentment, except perhaps for John's being so stupid as to let himself be found out.

*John*

Let me say this in justification for myself, Constance. I did my little best to prevent it. Angels could do no more.

*Constance*

And angels presumably have not the pernicious habit of smoking straight-cut cigarettes.

*John*

When you once get the taste for them, you prefer them to gippies.

*Mrs. Culver*

Don't be cynical, darling. That is the worst way to ease an aching heart. Come to your mother's arms, my dear, and let us have a good cry together. And then you'll feel better.

*Constance*

It's sweet of you, mother, but honestly I couldn't squeeze a tear out of my eyes if my life depended on it.

*Mrs. Culver*

And don't be too hard. Of course John is to blame. I admit that. He's been very, very naughty. But men are weak and women are so unscrupulous. I'm sure he's sorry for all the pain he's caused you.

*Martha*

What puzzles me is that you didn't do something the moment you discovered that John was having an affair.

*Constance*

To tell you the truth, I thought it no business of mine.

*Martha*

(*Indignantly*) Aren't you his wife?

*Constance*

John and I are very lucky people. Our marriage has been ideal.

*Martha*

How can you say that?

*Constance*

For five years we adored each other. That's much longer than most people do. Our honeymoon

lasted five years and then we had a most extraordinary stroke of luck: we ceased to be in love with one another simultaneously.

*John*

I protest, Constance. I've never ceased to be absolutely devoted to you.

*Constance*

I never said you had, darling. I'm convinced of it. I've never ceased to be devoted to you. We've shared one another's interests, we've loved to be together, I've exulted in your success and you've trembled in my illness. We've laughed at the same jokes and sighed over the same worries. I don't know any couple that's been bound together by a more genuine affection. But honestly, for the last ten years have you been in love with me?

*John*

You can't expect a man who's been married for fifteen years. . . .

*Constance*

My dear, I'm not asking for excuses. I'm only asking for a plain answer.

*John*

In the long run I enjoy your society much more than anybody else's. There's no one I like so much

as you. You're the prettiest woman I've ever known and I shall say the same when you're a hundred.

*Constance*

But does your heart leap into your mouth when you hear my footstep on the stairs, and when I come into the room, is your first impulse to catch me in your manly arms? I haven't noticed it.

*John*

I don't want to make a fool of myself.

*Constance*

Then I think you've answered my question. You're no more in love with me than I am with you.

*John*

You never said a word of this before.

*Constance*

I think most married couples tell one another far too much. There are some things that two people may know very well, but which it's much more tactful for them to pretend they don't.

*John*

How did you find out?

*Constance*

I'll tell you. One night as we were dancing to-

gether, all at once I noticed that we weren't keeping such good step as we generally did. It was because my mind was wandering. I was thinking how it would suit me to do my hair like a woman who was dancing alongside of us. Then I looked at you and I saw you were thinking what pretty legs she'd got. I suddenly realized that you weren't in love with me any more and at the same moment I realized that it was a relief, because I wasn't in love with you.

*John*

I must say it never occurred to me for a moment.

*Constance*

I know. A man thinks it quite natural that he should fall out of love with a woman, but it never strikes him for a moment that a woman can do anything so unnatural as to fall out of love with him. Don't be upset at that, darling, that is one of the charming limitations of your sex.

*Martha*

Do you mean mother and me to understand that since then John has been having one affair after another and you haven't turned a hair?

*Constance*

Since this is the first time he's been found out,

let us give him the benefit of the doubt and hope that till now he has never strayed from the strict and narrow path. You're not angry with me, John?

*John*

No, darling, not angry. But I *am* a little taken aback. I think you've been making rather a damned fool of me. It never struck me that your feelings for me had changed so much. You can't expect me to like it.

*Constance*

Oh, come now, you must be reasonable. You surely wouldn't wish me to have languished for all these years in a hopeless passion for you when you had nothing to give me in return but friendship and affection. Think what a bore it is to have some one in love with you whom you're not in love with.

*John*

I can't conceive of your ever being a bore, Constance.

*Constance*

(*Kissing her hand to him*) Don't you realize that we must thank our lucky stars? We are the favoured of the gods. I shall never forget those five years of exquisite happiness you gave me when I loved you, and I shall never cease to be grateful to you, not because you loved me, but because you in-

spired me with love. Our love never degenerated into weariness. Because we ceased loving one another at the very same moment we never had to put up with quarrels and reproaches, recriminations and all the other paraphernalia of a passion that has ceased on one side and is still alive and eager on the other. Our love was like a cross-word puzzle in which we both hit upon the last word at the same moment. That is why our lives since have been so happy; that is why ours is a perfect marriage.

*Martha*

Do you mean to say that it meant nothing to you when you found out that John was carrying on with Marie-Louise?

*Constance*

Human nature is very imperfect. I'm afraid I must admit that at the first moment I was vexed. But only at the first moment. Then I reflected that it was most unreasonable to be angry with John for giving to another something that I had no use for. That would be too much like a dog in the manger. And then I was fond enough of John to be willing that he should be happy in his own way. And if he was going to indulge in an intrigue . . . isn't that the proper phrase, John?

*John*

I have not yet made up my mind whether it really is an indulgence.

*Constance*

Then it was much better that the object of his affections should be so intimate a friend of mine that I could keep a maternal eye on him.

*John*

Really, Constance.

*Constance*

Marie-Louise is very pretty so that my self-esteem was not offended, and so rich that it was certain John would have no reason to squander money on her to the inconvenience of myself. She's not clever enough to acquire any ascendency over him, and so long as I kept his heart I was quite willing that she should have his senses. If you wanted to deceive me, John, I couldn't have chosen any one with whom I would more willingly be deceived than Marie-Louise.

*John*

I don't gather that you have been very grossly deceived, darling. You have such penetration that when you look at me I feel as though I were shivering without a stitch of clothing on.

*Mrs. Culver*

I don't approve of your attitude, Constance. In my day when a young wife discovered that her husband had been deceiving her, she burst into a flood of tears and went to stay with her mother for three weeks, not returning to her husband till he had been brought to a proper state of abjection and repentance.

*Martha*

Are we to understand then that you are not going to divorce John?

*Constance*

You know, I can never see why a woman should give up a comfortable home, a considerable part of her income and the advantage of having a man about to do all the tiresome and disagreeable things for her, because he has been unfaithful to her. She's merely cutting off her nose to spite her face.

*Martha*

I am at a loss for words. I cannot conceive how a woman of any spirit can sit down and allow her husband to make a perfect damned fool of her.

*Constance*

You've been very stupid, my poor John. In the ordinary affairs of life stupidity is much more tiresome than wickedness. You can mend the vicious,

but what in Heaven's name are you to do with the foolish?

*John*

I've been a fool, Constance. I know it, but I'm capable of learning by experience, so I can't be a damned fool.

*Constance*

You mean that in the future you'll be more careful to cover your tracks?

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, no, Constance, he means that this has been a lesson to him, and that in the future you'll have no cause for complaint.

*Constance*

I've always been given to understand that men only abandon their vices when advancing years have made them a burden rather than a pleasure. John, I'm happy to say, is still in the flower of his age. I suppose you give yourself another fifteen years, John, don't you?

*John*

Really, Constance, I don't know what you mean. The things you say sometimes are positively embarrassing.

*Constance*

I think at all events we may take it that Marie-Louise will have more than one successor.

*John*

Constance, I give you my word of honour. . . .

*Constance*

(*Interrupting*) That is the only gift you can make for which I can find no use. You see, so long as I was able to pretend a blissful ignorance of your goings-on we could all be perfectly happy. You were enjoying yourself and I received a lot of sympathy as the outraged wife. But now I do see that the position is very difficult. You have put me in a position that is neither elegant nor dignified.

*John*

I'm awfully sorry, Constance.

*Martha*

You're going to leave him?

*Constance*

No, I'm not going to leave him. John, you remember that Barbara offered to take me into her business? I refused. Well, I've changed my mind and I'm going to accept.

*John*

But why? I don't see your point.

*Constance*

I'm not prepared any more to be entirely dependent upon you, John.

*John*

But, my dear, everything I earn is at your disposal. It's a pleasure for me to provide for your wants. Heaven knows, they're not very great.

*Constance*

I know. Come, John, I've been very reasonable, haven't I? Don't try and thwart me when I want to do something on which I've set my heart.

(*There is an instant's pause*)

*John*

I don't understand. But if you put it like that, I haven't a word to say. Of course, you must do exactly as you wish.

*Constance*

That's a dear. Now go back to your patients or else I shall have to keep you as well as myself.

*John*

Will you give me a kiss?

*Constance*

Why not?

John

(*Kissing her*) It's peace between us?

*Constance*

Peace and good-will. (JOHN *goes out*) He is rather sweet, isn't he?

*Mrs. Culver*

What have you got on your mind, Constance?

*Constance*

I, mother? (*Teasing her*) What do you suspect?

*Mrs. Culver*

I don't like the look of you.

*Constance*

I'm sorry for that. Most people find me far from plain.

*Mrs. Culver*

You've got some deviltry in mind, but for the life of me I can't guess it.

*Martha*

I can't see what you expect to get out of working with Barbara.

*Constance*

Between a thousand and fifteen hundred a year, I believe.

*Martha*

I wasn't thinking of the money, and you know it.

*Constance*

I'm tired of being the modern wife.

*Martha*

What do you mean by the modern wife?

*Constance*

A prostitute who doesn't deliver the goods.

*Mrs. Culver*

My dear, what would your father say if he heard you say such things?

*Constance*

Darling, need we conjecture the remarks of a gentleman who's been dead for five and twenty years? Had he any gift for repartee?

*Mrs. Culver*

None whatever. He was good, but he was stupid. That is why the gods loved him and he died young.

(BERNARD KERSAL *opens the door and looks in*)

*Bernard*

May I come in?

*Constance*

Oh, there you are. I wondered what had become of you.

*Bernard*

When Marie-Louise saw my two-seater at the door she asked me to drive her. I couldn't very well refuse.

*Constance*

So you took her home.

*Bernard*

No, she said she was in such a state she must have her hair washed. I drove her to a place in Bond Street.

*Constance*

And what did she say to you?

*Bernard*

She said, "I don't know what you must think of me."

*Constance*

That is what most women say to a man when his opinion doesn't matter two straws to them. And what did you answer?

*Bernard*

Well, I said, "I prefer not to offer an opinion on a matter which is no business of mine."

*Constance*

Dear Bernard, one of the things I like most in you is that you always remain so perfectly in character. If the heavens fell you would still remain the perfect English gentleman.

*Bernard*

I thought it the most tactful thing to say.

*Constance*

Well, mother, I won't detain you any longer. I know that you and Martha have a thousand things to do.

*Mrs. Culver*

I'm glad you reminded me. Come, Martha. Good-bye, darling. Good-bye, Mr. Kersal.

*Bernard*

Good-bye.

*Constance*

(*To* MARTHA) Good-bye, dear. Thank you for all your sympathy. You've been a great help in my hour of need.

*Martha*

I don't understand and it's no good saying I do.

*Constance*

Bless you. (MRS. CULVER *and* MARTHA *go out.*

BERNARD *closes the door after them*) Shall we be very late?

*Bernard*

So late that it doesn't matter if we're a little later. I have something important to say to you.

*Constance*

(*Teasing him a little*) Important to me or important to you?

*Bernard*

I can't tell you how distressed I was at that terrible scene.

*Constance*

Oh, didn't you think it had its lighter moments?

*Bernard*

It's only this afternoon I learned the truth, and then I never imagined for a moment that you knew it too. I can't tell you how brave I think it of you to have borne all this torture with a smiling face. If I admired you before, I admire you ten times more now.

*Constance*

You're very sweet, Bernard.

*Bernard*

My heart bleeds when I think of what you've gone through.

*Constance*

It's not a very good plan to take other people's misfortunes too much to heart.

*Bernard*

Hardly an hour ago I told you that if ever you wanted me I was only too anxious to do anything in the world for you. I little thought then that the time would come so soon. There's no reason now why I shouldn't tell you of the love that consumes me. Oh, Constance, come to me. You know that if things were as I thought they were between you and John nothing would have induced me to say a word. But now he has no longer any claims on you. He doesn't love you. Why should you go on wasting your life with a man who is capable of exposing you to all this humiliation? You know how long and tenderly I've loved you. You can trust yourself to me. I'll give my whole life to making you forget the anguish you've endured. Will you marry me, Constance?

*Constance*

My dear, John may have behaved very badly but he's still my husband.

*Bernard*

Only in name. You've done everything in your

power to save a scandal and now if you ask him to let himself be divorced he's bound to consent.

*Constance*

Do you really think John has behaved so very badly to me?

*Bernard*

(*Astonished*) You don't mean to say that you have any doubts in your mind about his relationship with Marie-Louise?

*Constance*

None.

*Bernard*

Then what in God's name do you mean?

*Constance*

My dear Bernard, have you ever considered what marriage is among well-to-do people? In the working classes a woman cooks her husband's dinner, washes for him and darns his socks. She looks after the children and makes their clothes. She gives good value for the money she costs. But what is a wife in our class? Her house is managed by servants, nurses look after her children, if she has resigned herself to having any, and as soon as they are old enough she packs them off to school. Let us face it, she is no more than the mistress of a

man of whose desire she has taken advantage to insist on a legal ceremony that will prevent him from discarding her when his desire has ceased.

*Bernard*

She's also his companion and his helpmate.

*Constance*

My dear, any sensible man would sooner play bridge at his club than with his wife, and he'd always rather play golf with a man than with a woman. A paid secretary is a far better helpmate than a loving spouse. When all is said and done, the modern wife is nothing but a parasite.

*Bernard*

I don't agree with you.

*Constance*

You see, my poor friend, you are in love and your judgment is confused.

*Bernard*

I don't understand what you mean.

*Constance*

John gives me board and lodging, money for my clothes and my amusements, a car to drive in and a certain position in the world. He's bound to do all that because fifteen years ago he was madly in love

with me, and he undertook it; though, if you'd asked him, he would certainly have acknowledged that nothing is so fleeting as that particular form of madness called love. It was either very generous of him or very imprudent. Don't you think it would be rather shabby of me to take advantage now of his generosity or his want of foresight?

*Bernard*

In what way?

*Constance*

He paid a very high price for something that he couldn't get cheaper. He no longer wants that. Why should I resent it? I know as well as anybody else that desire is fleeting. It comes and goes and no man can understand why. The only thing that's certain is that when it's gone it's gone forever. So long as John continues to provide for me what right have I to complain that he is unfaithful to me? He bought a toy and if he no longer wants to play with it why should he? He paid for it.

*Bernard*

That might be all right if a man had only to think about himself. What about the woman?

*Constance*

I don't think you need waste too much sympathy on her. Like ninety-nine girls out of a hundred when I married I looked upon it as the only easy, honourable and lucrative calling open to me. When the average woman who has been married for fifteen years discovers her husband's infidelity it is not her heart that is wounded but her vanity. If she had any sense, she would regard it merely as one of the necessary inconveniences of an otherwise pleasant profession.

*Bernard*

Then the long and short of it is that you don't love me.

*Constance*

You think that my principles are all moonshine?

*Bernard*

I don't think they would have much influence if you were as crazy about me as I am about you. Do you still love John?

*Constance*

I'm very fond of him, he makes me laugh, and we get on together like a house on fire, but I'm not in love with him.

*Bernard*

And is that enough for you? Isn't the future sometimes a trifle desolate? Don't you want love?

(*A pause. She gives him a long reflective look*)

*Constance*

(*Charmingly*) If I did I should come to you for it, Bernard.

*Bernard*

Constance, what do you mean? Is it possible that you could ever care for me? Oh, my darling, I worship the ground you tread on.

(*He seizes her in his arms and kisses her passionately*)

*Constance*

(*Releasing herself*) Oh, my dear, don't be so sudden. I should despise myself entirely if I were unfaithful to John so long as I am entirely dependent on him.

*Bernard*

But if you love me?

*Constance*

I never said I did. But even if I did, so long as John provides me with all the necessities of existence I wouldn't be unfaithful. It all comes down to the economic situation. He has bought my fidelity and

I should be worse than a harlot if I took the price he paid and did not deliver the goods.

*Bernard*

Do you mean to say there's no hope for me at all?

*Constance*

The only hope before you at the moment is to start for Ranelagh before the game is over.

*Bernard*

Do you still want to go?

*Constance*

Yes.

*Bernard*

Very well. (*With a burst of passion*) I love you.

*Constance*

Then go down and start up the car, put a spot of oil in the radiator or something, and I'll join you in a minute. I want to telephone.

*Bernard*

Very well.

(*He goes out.* CONSTANCE *takes up the telephone*)

*Constance*

Mayfair 2646. . . . Barbara? It's Constance.

That offer you made me a fortnight ago—is it still open? Well, I want to accept it. . . . No, no, nothing has happened. John is very well. He's always sweet, you know. It's only that I want to earn my own living. When can I start? The sooner the better.

THE END OF ACT TWO

# The Constant Wife: Act Three

## ACT THREE

*The scene is the same as in the preceding acts. A year has passed. It is afternoon.*

CONSTANCE *is seated at a desk writing letters.* THE BUTLER *shows in* BARBARA FAWCETT *and* MARTHA.

*Bentley*

Mrs. Fawcett and Miss Culver.

*Constance*

Oh! Sit down, I'm just finishing a note.

*Barbara*

We met on the doorstep.

*Martha*

I thought I'd just look round and see if there was anything I could do to help you before you start.

*Constance*

That's very nice of you, Martha. I really don't think there is. I'm packed and ready, and for once I don't believe I've forgotten one of the things I shan't want.

*Barbara*

I felt I must run in to say good-bye to you.

*Constance*

Now, my dear, you mustn't neglect your work the moment my back is turned.

*Barbara*

Well, it's partly the work that's brought me. An order has just come in for a new house and they want an Italian room.

*Constance*

I don't like that look in your beady eye, Barbara.

*Barbara*

Well, it struck me that as you're going to Italy you might go round the shops and buy any nice pieces that you can find.

*Constance*

Perish the thought. I've worked like a dog for a year and last night at six o'clock I downed tools. I stripped off my grimy overalls, wrung the sweat from my honest brow and scrubbed my horny hands. You said I could take six weeks' holiday.

*Barbara*

I admit that you've thoroughly earned it.

*Constance*

When I closed the shop-door behind me, I ceased to be a British workingman and resumed the position of a perfect English lady.

*Martha*

I never saw you in such spirits.

*Constance*

Something accomplished, something done. But what I was coming to was this: for the next six weeks I refuse to give a moment's thought to bathrooms or wall-papers, kitchen sinks, scullery floors, curtains, cushions and refrigerators.

*Barbara*

I wasn't asking you to. I only wanted you to get some of that painted Italian furniture and a few mirrors.

*Constance*

No, I've worked hard and I've enjoyed my work, and now I'm going to enjoy a perfect holiday.

*Barbara*

Oh, well, have it your own way.

*Martha*

Constance dear, I think there's something you ought to know.

*Constance*

I should have thought you had discovered by now that I generally know the things I ought to know.

*Martha*

You'll never guess whom I saw in Bond Street this morning.

*Constance*

Yes, I shall. Marie-Louise.

*Martha*

Oh!

*Constance*

I'm sorry to disappoint you, darling. She rang me up an hour ago.

*Martha*

But I thought she wasn't coming back for another month. She was going to stay away a year.

*Constance*

She arrived last night and I'm expecting her every minute.

*Martha*

Here?

*Constance*

Yes. She said she simply must run in and see me before I left.

*Martha*

I wonder what she wants.

*Constance*

Perhaps to pass the time of day. I think it's rather sweet of her, considering how busy she must be on getting back after so long.

*Barbara*

She's been all over the place, hasn't she?

*Constance*

Yes, she's been in Malaya; Mortimer has interests there, you know, and in China, and now they've just come from India.

*Martha*

I often wondered if it was at your suggestion that they set off on that long tour immediately after that unfortunate scene.

*Constance*

Which, you must confess, no one enjoyed more than you, darling.

*Barbara*

It was certainly the most sensible thing they could do.

*Martha*

Of course you know your own business best, dar-

ling, but don't you think it's a little unfortunate that you should be going away for six weeks just as she comes back?

*Constance*

We workingwomen have to take our holidays when we can.

*Barbara*

Surely John has had his lesson. He's not going to make a fool of himself a second time.

*Martha*

Do you think he has really got over his infatuation, Constance?

*Constance*

I don't know at all. But here he is, you'd better ask him.

(*As she says these words,* JOHN *enters*)

*John*

Ask him what?

*Martha*

(*Not at all at a loss*) I was just wondering what you'd do with yourself during Constance's absence.

*John*

I've got a lot of work, you know, and I shall go to the club a good deal.

*Martha*

It seems a pity that you weren't able to arrange things so that you and Constance should take your holidays together.

*Barbara*

Don't blame me for that. I was quite willing to make my arrangements to suit Constance.

*Constance*

You see, I wanted to go to Italy and the only places John likes on the Continent are those in which it's only by an effort of the imagination that you can tell you're not in England.

*Martha*

What about Helen?

*Constance*

We've taken a house at Henley for August. John can play golf and go on the river and I shall be able to come up to town every day to look after the business.

*Barbara*

Well, dear, I'll leave you. I hope you'll have a wonderful holiday. I know you've deserved it. Do you know, I think I'm a very clever woman, John, to have persuaded Constance to work. She's been absolutely invaluable to me.

*John*

I never liked the idea and I'm not going to say I did.

*Barbara*

Haven't you forgiven me yet?

*John*

She insisted on it and I had to make the best of a bad job.

*Barbara*

Good-bye.

*Constance*

(*Kissing her*) Good-bye, dear. Take care of yourself.

*Martha*

I'll come with you, Barbara. Mother said she'd look in for a minute to say good-bye to you.

*Constance*

Oh, all right. Good-bye.

(*She kisses the two and accompanies them to the door. They go out*)

*John*

I say, Constance, I thought you had to go now because Barbara couldn't possibly get away.

*Constance*

Did I say that?

*John*

Certainly.

*Constance*

Oh!

*John*

If I'd dreamt that you could just as easily take your holiday when I take mine. . . .

*Constance*

(*Interrupting*) Don't you think it's a mistake for husbands and wives to take their holidays together? The only reason one takes a holiday is for rest and change and recreation. Do you think a man really gets that when he goes away with his wife?

*John*

It depends on the wife.

*Constance*

I know nothing more depressing than the sight of all those couples in a hotel dining room, one little couple to one little table, sitting opposite to one another without a word to say.

*John*

Oh, nonsense. You often see couples who are very jolly and cheerful.

*Constance*

Yes, I know, but look closely at the lady's wed-

ding-ring and you'll see that it rests uneasily on the hand it adorns.

*John*

We always get on like a house on fire and when I slipped a wedding-ring on your finger a bishop supervised the process. You're not going to tell me that I bore *you.*

*Constance*

On the contrary, you tickle me to death. It's that unhappy modesty of mine: I was afraid that you could have too much of my society. I thought it would refresh you if I left you to your own devices for a few weeks.

*John*

If you go on pulling my leg so persistently I shall be permanently deformed.

*Constance*

Anyhow it's too late now. My bags are packed, my farewells made and nothing bores people so much as to see you to-morrow when they've made up their minds to get on without you for a month.

*John*

H'm. Eyewash. . . . Look here, Constance, there's something I want to say to you.

*Constance*

Yes?

*John*

Do you know that Marie-Louise has come back?

*Constance*

Yes. She said she'd try and look in to say how do you do before I started. It'll be nice to see her again after so long.

*John*

I want you to do something for me, Constance.

*Constance*

What is it?

*John*

Well, you've been a perfect brick to me, and hang it all, I can't take advantage of your good nature. I must do the square thing.

*Constance*

I'm afraid I don't quite understand.

*John*

I haven't seen Marie-Louise since that day when Mortimer came here and made such a fool of himself. She's been away for nearly a year and taking all things into consideration I think it would be a mistake to resume the relations that we were on then.

*Constance*

What makes you think she wishes to?

*John*

The fact that she rang you up the moment she arrived looks ominous to me.

*Constance*

Ominous? You know some women can't see a telephone without taking the receiver off and then, when the operator says, "Number, please," they have to say something. I dare say ours was the first that occurred to Marie-Louise.

*John*

It's no good blinking the fact that Marie-Louise was madly in love with me.

*Constance*

Well, we can neither of us blame her for that.

*John*

I don't want to be unkind, but after all, circumstances have forced a break upon us and I think we had better look upon it as permanent.

*Constance*

Of course you must please yourself.

*John*

I'm not thinking of myself, Constance. I'm thinking partly of course of Marie-Louise's good, but, I confess, chiefly of you. I could never look you in the face again if everything between Marie-Louise and me were not definitely finished.

*Constance*

I should hate you to lose so harmless and inexpensive a pleasure.

*John*

Of course it'll be painful, but if one's made up one's mind to do a thing I think it's much better to do it quickly.

*Constance*

I think you're quite right. I'll tell you what I'll do, as soon as Marie-Louise comes I'll make an excuse and leave you alone with her.

*John*

That wasn't exactly my idea.

*Constance*

Oh?

*John*

It's the kind of thing that a woman can do so much better than a man. It struck me that it would come better from you than from me.

*Constance*

Oh, did it?

*John*

It's a little awkward for me, but it would be quite easy for you to say—well, you know the sort of thing, that you have your self-respect to think of, and to cut a long story short, she must either give me up or you'll raise hell.

*Constance*

But you know what a soft heart I have. If she bursts into tears and says she can't live without you I shall feel so sorry for her that I shall say, "Well, damn it all, keep him."

*John*

You wouldn't do me a dirty trick like that, Constance.

*Constance*

You know that your happiness is my chief interest in life.

*John*

(*After a moment's hesitation*) Constance, I will be perfectly frank with you. I'm fed up with Marie-Louise.

*Constance*

Darling, why didn't you say that at once?

*John*

Be a sport, Constance. You know that's not the kind of thing one can say to a woman.

*Constance*

I admit it's not the kind of thing she's apt to take very well.

*John*

Women are funny. When they're tired of you they tell you so without a moment's hesitation and if you don't like it you can lump it. But if you're tired of them you're a brute and a beast and boiling oil's too good for you.

*Constance*

Very well, leave it to me. I'll do it.

*John*

You're a perfect brick. But you'll let her down gently, won't you? I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world. She's a nice little thing, Constance.

*Constance*

Sweet.

*John*

And it's hard luck on her.

*Constance*

Rotten.

*John*

Make her understand that I'm more sinned against than sinning. I don't want her to think too badly of me.

*Constance*

Of course not.

*John*

But be quite sure it's definite.

*Constance*

Leave it to me.

*John*

You're a ripper, Constance. By George, no man could want a better wife.

(*The butler introduces* MARIE-LOUISE)

*Butler*

Mrs. Durham.

(*The two women embrace warmly*)

*Marie-Louise*

Darling, how perfectly divine to see you again. It's too, too wonderful.

*Constance*

My dear, how well you're looking. Are those the new pearls?

*Marie-Louise*

Aren't they sweet? But Mortimer bought me

the most heavenly emeralds when we were in India. Oh, John, how are you?

*John*

Oh, I'm all right, thanks.

*Marie-Louise*

Aren't you a little fatter than when I saw you last?

*John*

Certainly not.

*Marie-Louise*

I've lost pounds. (*To* CONSTANCE) I'm so glad I caught you. I should have been so disappointed to miss you. (*To* JOHN) Where are you going?

*John*

Nowhere. Constance is going alone.

*Marie-Louise*

Is she? How perfectly divine. I suppose you can't get away. Are you making pots of money?

*John*

I get along. Will you forgive me if I leave you? I've got to be off.

*Marie-Louise*

Of course. You're always busy, aren't you?

*John*

Good-bye.

*Marie-Louise*

I hope we shall see something of you while Constance is away.

*John*

Thank you very much.

*Marie-Louise*

Mortimer's golf has improved. He'd love to play with you.

*John*

Oh, yes, I should love it.

(*He goes out*)

*Marie-Louise*

I did so hope to find you alone. Constance, I've got heaps and heaps to tell you. Isn't it tactful of John to leave us? First of all I want to tell you how splendidly everything has turned out. You know you were quite right. I'm so glad I took your advice and made Mortimer take me away for a year.

*Constance*

Mortimer is no fool.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, no, for a man he's really quite clever. I gave him hell, you know, for ever having suspected me,

and at last he was just eating out of my hand. But I could see he wasn't quite sure of me. You know what men are—when they once get an idea in their heads it's dreadfully difficult for them to get it out again. But the journey was an inspiration; I was absolutely angelic all the time, and he made a lot of money, so everything in the garden was rosy.

*Constance*

I'm very glad.

*Marie-Louise*

I owe it all to you, Constance. I made Mortimer buy you a perfectly divine star sapphire in Ceylon. I told him he owed you some sort of reparation for the insult he'd put upon you. It cost a hundred and twenty pounds, darling, and we're taking it to Cartier's to have it set.

*Constance*

How thrilling.

*Marie-Louise*

You mustn't think I'm ungrateful. Now listen, Constance, I want to tell you at once that you needn't distress yourself about me and John.

*Constance*

I never did.

*Marie-Louise*

I know I behaved like a little beast, but I never

thought you'd find out. If I had, well, you know me well enough to be positive that nothing would have induced me to have anything to do with him.

*Constance*

You're very kind.

*Marie-Louise*

I want you to do something for me, Constance. Will you?

*Constance*

I'm always eager to oblige a friend.

*Marie-Louise*

Well, you know what John is. Of course he's a dear and all that kind of thing, but the thing's over and it's best that he should realize it at once.

*Constance*

Over?

*Marie-Louise*

Of course I know he's head over heels in love with me still. I saw that the moment I came into the room. One can't blame him for that, can one?

*Constance*

Men do find you fascinating.

*Marie-Louise*

But one has to think of oneself sometimes in this

world. He must see that it could never be the same after we discovered that you knew all about it.

*Constance*

I kept it from you as long as I could.

*Marie-Louise*

One couldn't help feeling then that you were rather making fools of us. It seemed to take the romance away if you see what I mean.

*Constance*

Dimly.

*Marie-Louise*

You know, I wouldn't hurt John's feelings for the world, but it's no good beating around the bush and I'm quite determined to have the thing finished and done with before you go.

*Constance*

This is very sudden. I'm afraid it'll be an awful shock to John.

*Marie-Louise*

I've quite made up my mind.

*Constance*

There isn't much time for a very long and moving scene, but I'll see if John is in still. Could you manage it in ten minutes?

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, but *I* can't see him. I want you to tell him.

*Constance*

Me!

*Marie-Louise*

You know him so well, you know just the sort of things to say to him. It's not very nice telling a man who adores you that you don't care for him in that way any more. It's so much easier for a third party.

*Constance*

Do you really think so?

*Marie-Louise*

I'm positive of it. You see, you can say that for your sake I've made up my mind that from now on we can be nothing but friends. You've been so wonderful to both of us, it would be dreadful if we didn't play the game now. Say that I shall always think of him tenderly and that he's the only man I've ever really loved, but that we must part.

*Constance*

But if he insists on seeing you?

*Marie-Louise*

It's no good, Constance, I can't see him. I shall

only cry and get my eyes all bunged up. You will do it for me, darling. Please.

*Constance*

I will.

*Marie-Louise*

I got the most divine evening frock in pale green satin on my way through Paris and it would look too sweet on you. Would you like me to give it to you? I've only worn it once.

*Constance*

Now tell me the real reason why you're so determined to get rid of John without a moment's delay.

(MARIE-LOUISE *looks at her and gives a little roguish smile*)

*Marie-Louise*

Swear you won't tell.

*Constance*

On my honour.

*Marie-Louise*

Well, my dear, we met a perfectly divine young man in India. He was A.D.C. to one of the governors and he came home on the same boat with us. He simply adores me.

*Constance*

And of course you adore him.

*Marie-Louise*

My dear, I'm absolutely mad about him. I don't know what's going to happen.

*Constance*

I think we can both give a pretty shrewd guess.

*Marie-Louise*

It's simply awful to have a temperament like mine. Of course you can't understand, you're cold.

*Constance*

(*Very calmly*) You're an immoral little beast, Marie-Louise.

*Marie-Louise*

Oh, I'm not. I have affairs—but I'm not promiscuous.

*Constance*

I should respect you more if you were an honest prostitute. She at least does what she does to earn her bread and butter. You take everything from your husband and give him nothing that he pays for. You are no better than a vulgar cheat.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Surprised and really hurt*) Constance, how can you say such things to me? I think it's terribly unkind of you. I thought you liked me.

*Constance*

I do. I think you a liar, a humbug and a parasite, but I like you.

*Marie-Louise*

You can't if you think such dreadful things about me.

*Constance*

I do. You're good-tempered and generous and sometimes amusing. I even have a certain affection for you.

*Marie-Louise*

(*Smiling*) I don't believe you mean a word you say. You know how devoted I am to you.

*Constance*

I take people as they are and I dare say that in another twenty years you'll be the pink of propriety.

*Marie-Louise*

Darling, I knew you didn't mean it, but you will have your little joke.

*Constance*

Now run along, darling, and I'll break the news to John.

*Marie-Louise*

Well, good-bye, and be gentle with him. There is no reason why we shouldn't spare him as much as

possible. (*She turns to go and at the door—stops*) Of course I've often wondered why with your looks you don't have more success than you do. I know now.

*Constance*

Tell me.

*Marie-Louise*

You see—you're a humourist and that always puts men off. (*She goes out. In a moment the door is cautiously opened and* JOHN *puts his head in*)

*John*

Has she gone?

*Constance*

Come in. A fine night and all's well.

*John*

(*Entering*) I heard the door bang. You broke it to her?

*Constance*

I broke it.

*John*

Was she awfully upset?

*Constance*

Of course it was a shock, but she kept a stiff upper lip.

*John*

Did she cry?

*Constance*

No. Not exactly. To tell you the truth I think she was stunned by the blow. But of course when she gets home and realises the full extent of her loss, she'll cry like anything.

*John*

I hate to see a woman cry.

*Constance*

It is painful, isn't it? But of course it's a relief to the nerves.

*John*

I think you're rather cool about it, Constance. I am not feeling any too comfortable. I shouldn't like her to think I'd treated her badly.

*Constance*

I think she quite understands that you're doing it for my sake. She knows that you have still a very great regard for her.

*John*

But you made it quite definite, didn't you?

*Constance*

Oh, quite.

*John*

I'm really very much obliged to you, Constance.

*Constance*

Not at all.

*John*

At all events I'm glad to think that you'll be able to set out on your holiday with a perfectly easy mind. By the way, do you want any money? I'll write you a cheque at once.

*Constance*

Oh, no, thank you. I've got plenty. I've earned fourteen hundred pounds during this year that I've been working.

*John*

Have you, by Jove! That's a very considerable sum.

*Constance*

I'm taking two hundred of it for my holiday. I've spent two hundred on my clothes and on odds and ends and the remaining thousand I've paid into your account this morning for my board and lodging during the last twelve months.

*John*

Nonsense, darling. I won't hear of such a thing. I don't want you to pay for your board and lodging.

*Constance*

I insist.

*John*

Don't you love me any more?

*Constance*

What has that to do with it? Oh, you think a woman can only love a man if he keeps her. Isn't that rating your powers of fascination too modestly? What about your charm and good humour?

*John*

Don't be absurd, Constance. I can perfectly well afford to support you in your proper station. To offer me a thousand pounds for your board and lodging is almost insulting.

*Constance*

Don't you think it's the kind of insult you could bring yourself to swallow? One can do a lot of amusing things with a thousand pounds.

*John*

I wouldn't dream of taking it. I never liked the idea of your going into business. I thought you had quite enough to do looking after the house and so forth.

*Constance*

Have you been less comfortable since I began working?

*John*

No, I can't say I have.

*Constance*

You can take my word for it, a lot of incompetent women talk a great deal of nonsense about housekeeping. If you know your job and have good servants it can be done in ten minutes a day.

*John*

Anyhow you wanted to work and I yielded. I thought in point of fact it would be a very pleasant occupation for you, but heavens knows, I wasn't expecting to profit financially by it.

*Constance*

No, I'm sure you weren't.

*John*

Constance, I could never help thinking that your determination had something to do with Marie-Louise.

(*There is a moment's pause and when* CONSTANCE *speaks it is not without seriousness*)

*Constance*

Haven't you wondered why I never reproached you for your affair with Marie-Louise?

*John*

Yes. I could only ascribe it to your unfathomable goodness.

*Constance*

You were wrong. I felt I hadn't the right to reproach you.

*John*

What do you mean, Constance? You had every right. We behaved like a couple of swine. I may be a dirty dog, but, thank God, I know I'm a dirty dog.

*Constance*

You no longer desired me. How could I blame you for that? But if you didn't desire me, what use was I to you? You've seen how small a share I take in providing you with the comfort of a well-ordered home.

*John*

You were the mother of my child.

*Constance*

Let us not exaggerate the importance of that, John. I performed a natural and healthy function of my sex. And all the tiresome part of looking after

the child when she was born I placed in the hands of much more competent persons. Let us face it, I was only a parasite in your house. You had entered into legal obligations that prevented you from turning me adrift, but I owe you a debt of gratitude for never letting me see by word or gesture that I was no more than a costly and at times inconvenient ornament.

*John*

I never looked upon you as an inconvenient ornament. And I don't know what you mean by being a parasite. Have I ever in any way suggested that I grudged a penny that I spent on you?

*Constance*

(*With mock amazement*) Do you mean to say that I ascribed to your beautiful manners what was only due to your stupidity? Are you as great a fool as the average man who falls for the average woman's stupendous bluff that just because he's married her he must provide for her wants and her luxuries, sacrifice his pleasures and comfort and convenience, and that he must look upon it as a privilege that she allows him to be her slave and bondman? Come, come, John, pull yourself together. You're a hundred years behind the times. Now that

women have broken down the walls of the harem they must take the rough-and-tumble of the street.

*John*

You forget all sorts of things. Don't you think a man may have gratitude to a woman for the love he has had for her in the past?

*Constance*

I think gratitude is often very strong in men so long as it demands from them no particular sacrifices.

*John*

Well, it's a curious way of looking at things, but obviously I have reason to be thankful for it. But after all you knew what was going on long before it came out. What happened then that made you make up your mind to go into business?

*Constance*

I am naturally a lazy woman. So long as appearances were saved I was prepared to take all I could get and give nothing in return. I was a parasite, but I knew it. But when we reached a situation where only your politeness or your lack of intelligence prevented you from throwing the fact in my teeth I changed my mind. I thought that I should very much like to be in a position where, if I felt

inclined to, I could tell you, with calm, courtesy, but with determination—to go to hell.

*John*

And are you in that position now?

*Constance*

Precisely. I owe you nothing. I am able to keep myself. For the last year I have paid my way. There is only one freedom that is really important and that is economic freedom, for in the long run the man who pays the piper calls the tune. Well, I have that freedom and upon my soul it's the most enjoyable sensation I can remember since I ate my first strawberry ice.

*John*

You know, I would sooner you had made me scenes for a month on end like any ordinary woman and nagged my life out than that you should harbour this cold rancour against me.

*Constance*

My poor darling, what are you talking about? Have you known me for fifteen years and do you think me capable of the commonness of insincerity? I harbour no rancour. Why, my dear, I'm devoted to you.

*John*

Do you mean to tell me that you've done all this

without any intention of making me feel a perfect cad?

*Constance*

On my honour. If I look in my heart I can only find in it affection for you and the most kindly and charitable feelings. Don't you believe me?

(*He looks at her for a moment and then makes a little gesture of bewilderment*)

*John*

Yes, oddly enough, I do. You are a remarkable woman, Constance.

*Constance*

I know, but keep it to yourself. You don't want to give a dog a bad name.

*John*

(*With an affectionate smile*) I wish I could get away. I don't half like the idea of your travelling by yourself.

*Constance*

Oh, but I'm not. Didn't I tell you?

*John*

No.

*Constance*

I meant to. I'm going with Bernard.

*John*

Oh. You never said so. Who else?

*Constance*

Nobody.

*John*

Oh! (*He is rather taken aback at the news*) Isn't that rather odd?

*Constance*

No. Why?

*John*

(*Not knowing at all how to take it*) Well, it's not usual for a young woman to take a six weeks' holiday with a man who can hardly be described as old enough to be her father.

*Constance*

Bernard's just about the same age as you.

*John*

Don't you think it'll make people gossip a bit?

*Constance*

I haven't gone out of my way to spread the news. In fact, now I come to think of it, I haven't told any one but you, and you, I am sure, will be discreet.

(JOHN *suddenly feels that his collar is a little too tight for him, and with his fingers he tries to loosen it*)

*John*

You're pretty certain to be seen by some one who knows you and they're bound to talk.

*Constance*

Oh, I don't think so. You see we're motoring all the way and we neither of us care for frequented places. One of the advantages of having really nice friends like ours is that you can always be certain of finding them at the fashionable resorts at the very moment when everybody you know is there.

*John*

Of course I am not so silly as to think that because a man and a woman go away together it is necessary to believe the worst about them, but you can't deny that it is rather unconventional. I wouldn't for a moment suggest that there'll be anything between you, but it's inevitable that ordinary persons should think there was.

*Constance*

(*As cool as a cucumber*) I've always thought that ordinary persons had more sense than the clever ones are ready to credit them with.

*John*

(*Deliberately*) What on earth do you mean?

*Constance*

Why, of course we're going as man and wife, John.

*John*

Don't be a fool, Constance. You don't know what you're talking about. That's not funny at all.

*Constance*

But, my poor John, whom do you take us for? Am I so unattractive that what I'm telling you is incredible? Why else should I go with Bernard? If I merely wanted a companion I'd go with a woman. We could have headaches together and have our hair washed at the same place and copy one another's nightdresses. A woman's a much better travelling companion than a man.

*John*

I may be very stupid, but I don't seem to be able to understand what you're saying. Do you really mean me to believe that Bernard Kersal is your lover?

*Constance*

Certainly not.

*John*

Then what *are* you talking about?

*Constance*

My dear, I can't put it any plainer. I'm going away for six weeks' holiday and Bernard has very kindly offered to come with me.

*John*

And where do I come in?

*Constance*

You don't come in. You stay at home and look after your patients.

*John*

(*Trying his best to control himself*) I flatter myself I'm a sensible man. I'm not going to fly into a passion. Many men would stamp and rave or break the furniture. I have no intention of being melodramatic, but you must allow me to say that what you've just told me is very surprising.

*Constance*

Just for a moment, perhaps, but I'm sure you have only to familiarize yourself with the notion in order to become reconciled to it.

*John*

I'm doubtful whether I shall have time to do that, for I feel uncommonly as though I were about to have an apoplectic stroke.

*Constance*

Undo your collar then. Now I come to look at you I confess that you are more than usually red in the face.

*John*

What makes you think that I am going to allow you to go?

*Constance*

(*Good-humouredly*) Chiefly the fact that you can't prevent me.

*John*

I can't bring myself to believe that you mean what you say. I don't know what ever put such an idea into your head.

*Constance*

(*Casually*) I thought a change might do me good.

*John*

Nonsense.

*Constance*

Why? You did. Don't you remember? You were getting rather flat and stale. Then you had an affair with Marie-Louise and you were quite another man. Gay and amusing, full of life, and much more agreeable to live with. The moral effect on you was quite remarkable.

*John*

It's different for a man than for a woman.

*Constance*

Are you thinking of the possible consequences? We have long passed the Victorian Era when asterisks were followed after a certain interval by a baby.

*John*

That never occurred to me. What I meant was that if a man's unfaithful to his wife she's an object of sympathy, whereas if a woman's unfaithful to her husband he's merely an object of ridicule.

*Constance*

That is one of those conventional prejudices that sensible people must strive to ignore.

*John*

Do you expect me to sit still and let this man take my wife away from under my very nose? I wonder you don't ask me to shake hands with him and wish him good luck.

*Constance*

That's just what I am going to do. He's coming here in a few minutes to say good-bye to you.

*John*

I shall knock him down.

*Constance*

I wouldn't take any risks in your place. He's pretty hefty and I'm under the impression that he's very nippy with his left.

*John*

I shall have great pleasure in telling him exactly what I think of him.

*Constance*

Why? Have you forgotten that I am charming to Marie-Louise? We were the best of friends. She never bought a hat without asking me to go and help her choose it.

*John*

I have red blood in my veins.

*Constance*

I'm more concerned at the moment with the grey matter in your brain.

*John*

Is he in love with you?

*Constance*

Madly. Didn't you know?

*John*

I? How should I?

*Constance*

He's been here a great deal during the last year. Were you under the impression that he only came to see you?

*John*

I never paid any attention to him. I thought him rather dull.

*Constance*

He is rather dull. But he's very sweet.

*John*

What sort of a man is it who eats a fellow's food and drinks his wine and then makes love to his wife behind his back?

*Constance*

A man very like you, John, I should say.

*John*

Not at all. Mortimer is the sort of man who was born to be made a fool of.

*Constance*

None of us know for certain the designs of providence.

*John*

I see you're bent on driving me to desperation. I shall break something in a minute.

*Constance*

There's that blue-and-white bowl that your Uncle Henry gave us as a wedding present. Break that, it's only a modern imitation.

(*He takes the bowl and hurls it on the floor so that it is shattered*)

*John*

There.

*Constance*

Do you feel better?

*John*

Not a bit.

*Constance*

It's a pity you broke it then. You might have given it away as a wedding present to one of your colleagues at the hospital.

(*The butler shows in* Mrs. Culver)

*Butler*

Mrs. Culver.

*Constance*

Oh, mother, how sweet of you to come. I was so hoping I'd see you before I left.

*Mrs. Culver*

Oh, you've had an accident.

*Constance*

No, John's in a temper and he thought it would relieve him if he broke something.

*Mrs. Culver*

Nonsense, John's never in a temper.

*John*

That's what you think, Mrs. Culver. Yes, I am in a temper. I'm in a filthy temper. Are you a party to this plan of Constance's?

*Constance*

No, mother doesn't know.

*John*

Can't you do something to stop it? You have some influence over her. You must see that the thing's preposterous.

*Mrs. Culver*

My dear boy, I haven't the ghost of an idea what you're talking about.

*John*

She's going to Italy with Bernard Kersal. Alone.

*Mrs. Culver*

(*With a stare*) It's not true; how d'you know?

*John*

She's just told me so, as bold as brass, out of a blue sky. She mentioned it in the course of conversation as if she were saying: "Darling, your coat wants brushing."

*Mrs. Culver*

Is it true, Constance?

*Constance*

Quite.

*Mrs. Culver*

But haven't you been getting on with John? I always thought you two were as happy as the day is long.

*John*

So did I. We've never had the shadow of a quarrel. We've always got on.

*Mrs. Culver*

Don't you love John any more, darling?

*Constance*

Yes, I'm devoted to him.

*John*

How can you be devoted to a man when you're going to do him the greatest injury that a woman can do to a man?

*Constance*

Don't be idiotic, John. I'm going to do you no more injury than you did me a year ago.

*John*

(*Striding up to her, thinking quite erroneously that he sees light*) Are you doing this in order to pay me out for Marie-Louise?

*Constance*

Don't be such a fool, John. Nothing is further from my thoughts.

*Mrs. Culver*

The circumstances are entirely different. It was very naughty of John to deceive you, but he's sorry for what he did and he's been punished for it. It was all very dreadful and caused us a great deal of pain. But a man's a man and you expect that kind of thing from him. There are excuses for him. There are none for a woman. Men are naturally polygamous and sensible women have always made allowances for their occasional lapse from a condition which modern civilisation has forced on them. Women are monogamous. They do not naturally desire more than one man and that is why the common sense of the world has heaped obloquy upon them when they have overstepped the natural limitations of their sex.

*Constance*

(*Smiling*) It seems rather hard that what is sauce for the gander shouldn't also be sauce for the goose.

*Mrs. Culver*

We all know that unchastity has no moral effect on men. They can be perfectly promiscuous and remain upright, industrious and reliable. It's quite different with women. It ruins their character. They become untruthful and dissipated, lazy, shiftless and dishonest. That is why the experience of ten thousand years has demanded chastity in women. Because it has learnt that this virtue is the key to all others.

*Constance*

They were dishonest because they were giving away something that wasn't theirs to give. They had sold themselves for board, lodging and protection. They were chattel. They were dependent on their husbands and when they were unfaithful to them they were liars and thieves. I'm not dependent on John. I am economically independent and therefore I claim my sexual independence. I have this afternoon paid into John's account one thousand pounds for my year's keep.

*John*

I refuse to take it.

*Constance*

Well, you'll damned well have to.

*Mrs. Culver*

There's no object in losing your temper.

*Constance*

I have mine under perfect control.

*John*

If you think what they call free love is fun, you're mistaken. Believe me, it's the most overrated amusement that was ever invented.

*Constance*

In that case, I wonder why people continue to indulge in it.

*John*

I ought to know what I'm talking about, hang it all. It has all the inconveniences of marriage and none of its advantages. I assure you, my dear, the game is not worth the candle.

*Constance*

You may be right, but you know how hard it is to profit by anybody's experience. I think I'd like to see for myself.

*Mrs. Culver*

Are you in love with Bernard?

*Constance*

To tell you the truth I haven't quite made up my mind. How does one know if one's in love?

*Mrs. Culver*

My dear, I only know one test. Could you use his tooth-brush?

*Constance*

No.

*Mrs. Culver*

Then you're not in love with him.

*Constance*

He's adored me for fifteen years. There's something in that long devotion which gives me a funny little feeling in my heart. I should like to do something to show him that I'm not ungrateful. You see, in six weeks he goes back to Japan. There is no chance of his coming to England again for seven years. I'm thirty-six now and he adores me; in seven years I shall be forty-three. A woman of forty-three is often charming, but it's seldom that a man of fifty-five is crazy about her. I came to the conclusion that it must be now or never and so I asked him if he'd like me to spend these last six weeks with him in Italy. When I wave my handkerchief to him as the ship that takes him sails out of the harbour at Naples I hope that he will feel

that all those years of unselfish love have been well worth the while.

*John*

Six weeks. Do you intend to leave him at the end of six weeks?

*Constance*

Oh, yes, of course. It's because I'm putting a limit to our love that I think it may achieve the perfection of something that is beautiful and transitory. Why, John, what is it that makes a rose so lovely but that its petals fall as soon as it is full blown?

*John*

It's all come as such a shock and a surprise that I hardly know what to say. You've got me at a complete disadvantage.

(MRS. CULVER, *who has been standing at the window, gives a little cry*)

*Constance*

What is it?

*Mrs. Culver*

Here is Bernard. He's just driven up to the door.

*John*

Do you expect me to receive him as if I were blissfully unconscious of your plans?

*Constance*

It would be more comfortable. It would be stupid to make a scene and it wouldn't prevent my going on this little jaunt with him.

*John*

I have my dignity to think of.

*Constance*

One often preserves that best by putting it in one's pocket. It would be kind of you, John, to treat him just as pleasantly as I treated Marie-Louise when I knew she was your mistress.

*John*

Does he know that I know?

*Constance*

Of course not. He's a little conventional, you know, and he couldn't happily deceive a friend if he thought there was no deception.

*Mrs. Culver*

Constance, is there nothing I can say to make you reconsider your decision?

*Constance*

Nothing, darling.

*Mrs. Culver*

Then I may just as well save my breath. I'll slip away before he comes.

*Constance*

Oh, all right. Good-bye, mother. I'll send you a lot of picture post-cards.

*Mrs. Culver*

I don't approve of you, Constance, and I can't pretend that I do. No good will come of it. Men were meant by nature to be wicked and delightful and deceive their wives, and women were meant to be virtuous and forgiving and to suffer verbosely. That was ordained from all eternity and none of your new-fangled notions can alter the decrees of Providence.

(*The butler enters, followed by* BERNARD)

*Bentley*

Mr. Kersal.

*Mrs. Culver*

How do you do, Bernard, and good-bye. I'm just going.

*Bernard*

Oh, I'm sorry. Good-bye.

(*She goes out*)

*Constance*

(*To* BERNARD) How d'you do. Just one moment. (*To the butler*) Oh, Bentley, get my things downstairs and put them in a taxi, will you?

*Bentley*

Very good, madam.

*Bernard*

Are you just starting? It's lucky I came when I did. I should have hated to miss you.

*Constance*

And let me know when the taxi's here.

*Bentley*

Yes, madam.

*Constance*

Now I can attend to you. (*The butler goes out*)

*Bernard*

Are you looking forward to your holiday?

*Constance*

Immensely. I've never gone on a jaunt like this before, and I'm really quite excited.

*Bernard*

You're going alone, aren't you?

*Constance*

Oh, yes, quite alone.

*Bernard*

It's rotten for you not to be able to get away, old man.

*John*

Rotten.

*Bernard*

I suppose these are the penalties of greatness. I can quite understand that you have to think of your patients first.

*John*

Quite.

*Constance*

Of course John doesn't very much care for Italy.

*Bernard*

Oh, are you going to Italy? I thought you said Spain.

*John*

No, she always said Italy.

*Bernard*

Oh, well, that's hardly your mark, is it, old boy? Though I believe there are some sporting links on the Lake of Como.

*John*

Are there?

*Bernard*

I suppose there's no chance of your being anywhere near Naples towards the end of July?

*Constance*

I don't really know. My plans are quite vague.

*Bernard*

I was only asking because I'm sailing from Naples. It would be fun if we met there.

*John*

Great fun.

*Constance*

I hope you'll see a lot of John while I'm away. I'm afraid he'll be a trifle lonely, poor darling. Why don't you dine together one day next week?

*Bernard*

I'm terribly sorry, but you know I'm going away.

*Constance*

Oh, are you? I thought you were going to stay in London till you had to start for Japan.

*Bernard*

I meant to, but my doctor has ordered me to go and do a cure.

*John*

What sort of a cure?

*Bernard*

Oh, just a cure. He says I want bucking up.

*John*

Oh, does he? What's the name of your doctor?

*Bernard*

No one you ever heard of. A man I used to know in the war.

*John*

Oh!

*Bernard*

So I'm afraid this is good-bye. Of course, it's a wrench leaving London, especially as I don't expect to be in Europe again for some years, but I always think it rather silly not to take a man's advice when you've asked for it.

*John*

More especially when he's charged you three guineas.

*Constance*

I'm sorry. I was counting on you to keep John out of mischief during my absence.

*Bernard*

I'm not sure if I could guarantee to do that. But we might have done a few theatres together and had a game of golf or two.

*Constance*

It would have been jolly, wouldn't it, John?

*John*

Very jolly.

(*The butler comes in*)

*Bentley*

The taxi's waiting, madam.

*Constance*

Thank you.

(*The butler goes out*)

*Bernard*

I'll take myself off. In case I don't see you again I'd like to thank you now for all your kindness to me during the year I've spent in London.

*Constance*

It's been very nice to see you.

*Bernard*

You and John have been most awfully good to me. I never imagined I was going to have such a wonderful time.

*Constance*

We shall miss you terribly. It's been a great comfort to John to think that there was some one to take me out when he had to be away on one of his operations. Hasn't it, darling?

*John*

Yes, darling.

*Constance*

When he knew I was with you he never worried. Did you, darling?

*John*

No, darling.

*Bernard*

I'm awfully glad if I've been able to make myself useful. Don't forget me entirely, will you?

*Constance*

We're not likely to do that, are we, darling?

*John*

No, darling.

*Bernard*

And if you ever have a moment to spare you will write to me, won't you? You don't know how much it means to us exiles.

*Constance*

Of course we will. We'll both write. Won't we, darling?

*John*

Yes, darling.

*Constance*

John writes such a good letter. So chatty, you know, and amusing.

*Bernard*

That's a promise. Well, good-bye, old boy. Have a good time.

*John*

Thanks, old bean.

*Bernard*

Good-bye, Constance. There's so much I want to say to you that I don't know where to begin.

*John*

I don't want to hurry you, but the taxi is just ticking its head off.

*Bernard*

John is so matter-of-fact. Well, I'll say nothing then but God bless you.

*Constance*

Au revoir.

*Bernard*

If you do go to Naples you will let me know, won't you? If you send a line to my club, it'll be forwarded at once.

*Constance*

Oh, all right.

*Bernard*

Good-bye.

(*He gives them both a friendly nod and goes out.* CONSTANCE *begins to giggle and soon is seized with uncontrollable laughter*)

*John*

Will you kindly tell me what there is to laugh at? If you think it amuses me to stand here like patience on a monument and have my leg pulled you're mistaken. What did you mean by all that balderdash about meeting you by chance in Naples?

*Constance*

He was throwing you off the scent.

*John*

The man's a drivelling idiot.

*Constance*

D'you think so? I thought he was rather ingenious. Considering he hasn't had very much practice in this sort of thing I thought he did very well.

*John*

Of course if you're determined to find him a pattern of perfection it's useless for me to attempt to argue. But honestly, speaking without prejudice for or against, I'm sorry to think of you throwing yourself away on a man like that.

*Constance*

Perhaps it's natural that a man and his wife should differ in their estimate of her prospective lover.

*John*

You're not going to tell me he's better-looking than I am.

*Constance*

No. You have always been my ideal of manly beauty.

*John*

He's no better dressed than I am.

*Constance*

He could hardly expect to be. He goes to the same tailor.

*John*

I don't think you can honestly say he's more amusing than I am.

*Constance*

No, I honestly can't.

*John*

Then in Heaven's name why do you want to go away with him?

*Constance*

Shall I tell you? Once more before it's too late I want to feel about me the arms of a man who adores the ground I walk on. I want to see his face light up when I enter the room. I want to feel the pressure of his hand when we look at the moon together and the pleasantly tickling sensation when

his arm tremulously steals around my waist. I want to let my hand fall on his shoulder and feel his lips softly touch my hair.

*John*

The operation is automatically impossible, the poor devil would get such a crick in the neck he wouldn't know what to do.

*Constance*

I want to walk along country lanes holding hands and I want to be called by absurd pet names. I want to talk baby-talk by the hour together.

*John*

Oh, God.

*Constance*

I want to know that I'm eloquent and witty when I'm dead silent. For ten years I've been very happy in your affections, John, we've been the best and dearest friends, but now just for a little while I hanker for something else. Do you grudge it me? I want to be loved.

*John*

But, my dear, I'll love you. I've been a brute, I've neglected you, it's not too late and you're the only woman I've ever really cared for. I'll chuck everything and we'll go away together.

*Constance*

The prospect does not thrill me.

*John*

Come, darling, have a heart. I gave up Marie-Louise. Surely you can give up Bernard.

*Constance*

But you gave up Marie-Louise to please yourself, not to please me.

*John*

Don't be a little beast, Constance. Come away with me. We'll have such a lark.

*Constance*

Oh, my poor John, I didn't work so hard to gain my economic independence in order to go on a honeymoon with my own husband.

*John*

Do you think I can't be a lover as well as a husband?

*Constance*

My dear, no one can make yesterday's cold mutton into to-morrow's lamb cutlets.

*John*

You know what you're doing. I was determined in future to be a model husband and you're driving

me right into the arms of Marie-Louise. I give you my word of honour that the moment you leave this house I shall drive straight to her door.

*Constance*

I should hate you to have a fruitless journey. I'm afraid you won't find her at home. She has a new young man and she says he's too divine.

*John*

What!

*Constance*

He's the A.D.C. of a Colonial Governor. She came here to-day to ask me to break the news to you that henceforth everything was over between you.

*John*

I hope you told her first that I was firmly resolved to terminate a connection that could only cause you pain.

*Constance*

I couldn't. She was in such a blooming hurry to give me her message.

*John*

Really, Constance, for your own pride I should have thought you wouldn't like her to make a perfect fool of me. Any other woman would have

said: "What a strange coincidence. Why it's only half an hour since John told me he had made up his mind never to see you again." But of course you don't care two straws for me any more, that's quite evident.

*Constance*

Oh, don't be unjust, darling. I shall always care for you. I may be unfaithful, but I am constant. I always think that's my most endearing quality.

(*The butler opens the door*)

*John*

(*Irritably*) What is it?

*Bentley*

I thought madam had forgotten that the taxi was at the door.

*John*

Go to hell.

*Bentley*

Very good, sir.

(*He goes out*)

*Constance*

I don't see why you should be rude to him. Bernard will pay the taxi. Anyhow I must go now or he'll begin to think I'm not coming. Good-bye, darling. I hope you'll get on all right in my absence.

Just give the cook her head and you'll have no trouble. Won't you say good-bye to me?

*John*

Go to the devil.

*Constance*

All right. I shall be back in six weeks.

*John*

Back? Where?

*Constance*

Here.

*John*

Here? Here? Do you think I'm going to take you back?

*Constance*

I don't see why not. When you've had time to reflect you'll realise that you have no reason to blame me. After all, I'm taking from you nothing that you want.

*John*

Are you aware that I can divorce you for this?

*Constance*

Quite. But I married very prudently. I took the precaution to marry a gentleman and I know that you could never bring yourself to divorce me for doing no more than you did yourself.

*John*

I wouldn't divorce you. I wouldn't expose my worst enemy to the risk of marrying a woman who's capable of treating her husband as you're treating me.

*Constance*

(*At the door*) Well, then, shall I come back?

*John*

(*After a moment's hesitation.*) You are the most maddening, wilful, capricious, wrong-headed, delightful and enchanting woman man was ever cursed with having for a wife. Yes, damn you, come back.

(*She lightly kisses her hand to him and slips out, slamming the door behind her*)

THE END

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